

T-500: INTRODUCTION TO THEOLOGY LECTURE NOTES

The purpose of this course is to introduce and examine some major topics, issues and options in the understanding of the nature and tasks of Christian theology, with a view towards developing your own capacity for critical and constructive theological reflection.

Theology: As I understand it, *Christian theology is making sense of the Gospel and all other truths that claim us most radically*. As such it embraces both “faith seeking understanding” and critical reflection upon that faith. It starts from a recognition that we all live by convictions, and that among those convictions are what I call truths that claim us most radically. They shape who we are so fundamentally (i.e., radically) that we cannot even think about them without in some sense living by them. Take for example the conviction: “People matter.” Can you think about this without living by it? I think not. In that case it is a conviction that could be said to claim you so fundamentally that you must presume its truth. But we live amidst a variety of such truths, and the variations give rise to questions. Christians, Jews and Muslims are also most radically claimed by the conviction that God matters at least as much as people do, and that leads us to ask where our ultimate loyalties should lie. Should loyalty to God take precedence over loyalty to humanity and other creatures? Devout people have answered that question in a number of ways. So we have to make sense of questions like these—at least enough sense that we can get on with our lives. And that is the kind of sense-making theology requires. What makes theology Christian is when amidst such truths we find ourselves claimed just as radically by some recognizable rendition of the Gospel or “good news” of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel: As your professor, I get the privilege of using my own rendition of the Gospel to shape the structure of this course. But a central aim of the course is to get you to articulate and support your own rendition of the Gospel. (The assumption here is that in taking this course at this school you consider yourself either some type of Christian or else someone in dialogue with Christianity.) Your rendition might look strikingly different from mine. What matters is that you *articulate it carefully* and *support it aptly*. I am supposed to model this for you, so let me start by presenting you with the Gospel as best I can formulate it here and now:

In eccentricity and brokenness,
the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ
embraces each and every one of us just as we are
and draws us to embody that communion for all others,
now and always.

As you will see, each of the topics covered in this course is a variation on this one theme. I encourage you to construct your papers along similar lines.

Required Texts

Peter C. Hodgson & Robert H. King, eds., *Readings in Christian Theology*

Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite & Mary Potter Engel, eds., *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*

Theology as Embodying the Gospel

To repeat, ***Christian theology is simply making sense of the Gospel and all other truths that claim us most radically.*** Since that touches on just about every subject, theology often gives rise to exceedingly abstract formulations. That needs no apology. But at its heart theology is the most vital engagement imaginable. At its heart theology is not arguments, not static formulas, but a constant, lively interaction among all the most radical claims on our lives. It is a kind of conversation that never ends. Even in solitude the conversation goes on internally. And even when our attention focuses elsewhere, it goes on in the background. It is how we try to face the variety of claims on our lives with integrity.

Everybody should engage in that kind of conversation, or rather own up to the fact that they are already so engaged and try to do it less haphazardly. Weighty thinkers have argued for this as a universal human obligation with varying degrees of success (and failure). I welcome the effort and have learned from it. But for those of us claimed by the Gospel, that kind of conversation is simply one of the most fundamental ways that we eccentric and broken creatures can embody the correspondingly eccentric and broken communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ.

I cannot embody that communion without welcoming others as genuine others and seeking the same of them.

I cannot welcome or seek welcome without facing the variety of claims our lives make on one another simply by virtue of their intersection.

And I cannot face those claims with integrity without struggling to resist and mend the brokenness that infects everything we all do.

At its heart, then, theology is at one with the pursuits of peace and justice and with the practices we traditionally call spiritual disciplines. These are all aspects of embodying the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ.

It is theology's distinctive and most important task to help us imagine realistically just how such an eccentric and broken communion could already be at work embracing and transfiguring all the mundane, eccentric and broken practices that make up our lives here and now.

But the influences here are and should be multiple: our pursuits of peace and justice and our cultivation of spiritual disciplines are just as important for theology's health as theology remains for those practices.

Questioning God?

I want to address one topic that students tend to raise at this point: Some feel as if we're doing something irreverent here, asking all these questions. How dare we question God? Let me make three points:

- 1) Most of the time, *it's not God we're questioning—it's what other people have told us about God, or an experience you or I thought we had of God, etc.* That's all very human stuff. And how can we avoid that if we believe that in this life we never get beyond eccentric and broken responses to the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ? I can't make any human testimony a final trump card, beyond all question: not Scripture, not a church's teaching office, not me. That's why being part of a responsibly confessing community is so important. Our questioning should be responsible and sometimes reverent, but we can't avoid questions if we're honest about ourselves. Maybe my questioning sounds too light-hearted at times. So keep in mind that even then, at least in my better moments, the underlying context is one of reverence and responsibility, even if I don't mention it. In fact one reason why I have gotten so liturgical is to instill in myself the habits of awe, wonder, deep joy and delight in the presence of a mystery I'll never fathom. The light-heartedness is there because in God's embrace I have been freed to admit that none of the rest of us is God and that none of the rest of us needs to be God, and I find it amusing when we catch ourselves trying to be God anyway. So by all means, stay reverent, but lighten up a little.
- 2) *Even if we question God, that's a perfectly Biblical thing to do.* And you'd know that if you paid enough attention to the Bible. Abraham haggles with God over the fate of Sodom, Moses talks God out of getting nasty, Jonah chides God for not being nasty enough (if that's not a light-hearted book, I don't know what is), after reminding Job of who's who, God turns around and tells Job's friends that only Job's honest, bitter questioning tells the truth, not their pious platitudes, the Canaanite woman shows Jesus he can be more generous than he had thought, and I can't begin to list the Psalms that cross-examine God more bluntly than Kenneth Starr could ever dream. How can we avoid concluding that this is a God who wants to meet us in questions just as much as answers? If you don't dare to question God, you're just not Biblical enough.
- 3) *Atrocities in Christ's name demand a questioning faith.* It's because we haven't preserved that willingness to question that we can't begin to list all the people in the last two thousand years that Christians have at least wanted to see dead, and sometimes made that happen, just because they wouldn't stop questioning. As the heirs of those Christians it's our obligation to show a better and, I hope, more faithful way.

Communion in Eccentricity & Brokenness: Revelation, Sources & Norms

Lecture Notes
Charles W. Allen

Hodgson/King, 31-59; 88-117

Thistlethwaite, 265-297 (cf. 1-96)

McGrath, 181-232

Revelation, Sources & Norms in Light of the Gospel

Our understanding of God's self-revelation is the presupposition for what we think of the usual sources: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

The principal norm for Christian theology is the Gospel, which already expresses a concept of God's self-revelation: We know God fundamentally because the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ already embraces and transfigures us here and now, in our own eccentricity and brokenness (or more traditionally, our creatureliness and fallenness).

The Gospel also reminds us that this communion is also eccentric and broken in its own peculiar way. This is especially manifested and confirmed in the life, death, and risen life of Jesus of Nazareth. The God who eccentrically created this eccentric world out of uncoerced love is also the God who follows that world into brokenness and actually embraces brokenness in God's own life in order to mend and transform ours.

It is only recently and reluctantly that Christians have begun to consider that, if this is the kind of God we know, then maybe we should stop expecting our sources of revelation to be any less eccentric and broken than God has already been on our behalf.

Our emphasis, I suggest, should shift from hiding behind doctrines of inerrancy and infallibility to a more communal process of mutual accountability in a "responsibly confessing community."

How do we know God?

From the catechism of the *New Zealand Prayer Book* (p. 926):

"How do we become aware of God? [Revelation]

"By God's initiative in our thinking and understanding: by experiencing and reflecting on the wonder and mystery of creation, birth and death, love, guilt and the need to find meaning and worth beyond ourselves.

"Where do we learn about God? [Sources]

"Christians learn about God in the Bible, in the teaching of the Church summed up in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, and through sharing in the living community of faith."

As Christians our starting point is always confessional: our appeals to "reason" and "experience" are already shaped by various traditions in turn shaped by Jewish-Christian scripture, and these "sources" are decisive only insofar as they present us with truths that we confess to have claimed us most radically.

To be "claimed most radically" by certain truths is something like what Christians and others have tended to mean when speaking of revelation: however we learn of such

truths, they seem to wind up claiming us more than we claim them, as if they had a life, an initiative, of their own at least to a certain extent.

A confessional starting point may sound arbitrary, private or relativistic, but it is not: it is not willfully chosen but *claims* us. And by definition to confess is to acknowledge accountability to others. Furthermore, even from a confessional starting point certain truths seem inescapable not just for us but for anybody.

Our current intellectual climate suggests that all reasoning is in some sense confessionally rooted. (Indeed, this seems to be one of those inescapable universal truths.)

This to some extent blurs distinctions between "general revelation" (reason and experience) and "special revelation" (scripture and tradition).

Appeals to reason and experience are at best intriguing but inconclusive if detached from confessing how we are most radically claimed here and now.

Appeals to scripture and tradition are similarly inconclusive if detached from confessing how we are most radically claimed here and now.

This renders doctrines of "inerrancy" and "infallibility" pointless. We may be obliged to say that the *ultimate* source of confessed truth is unerring and in some sense absolute. But with a confessional starting point even appeals to absolute truth are fraught with eccentricity and brokenness.

Nothing can save us from the risk of being drastically wrong. (Look at the story of Adam and Eve.) All we can do is take responsibility for risks we cannot help taking.

That is precisely why **appeals to scripture, tradition, reason and experience (including my confessed experience) are misleading apart from participating in a responsibly confessing community.**

A responsibly confessing community is one that a) confesses itself to be claimed by certain truths most radically, and b) confesses that its attempts to live by these truths are 1) fallible, 2) subject to self-deception (due to inordinate self-concern) *but* 3) still inescapable, owing to their radicality.

Because its attempts to live by such claims are fallible, subject to self-deception, yet inescapable, such a community, to be responsible, must agonize over the extent to which it must welcome or resist the influence of competitive claims (and those who hold them). (Space must be allowed for responsible disagreement, but not all disagreement is responsible.)

I would claim that these features characterize any community that makes claims to any kind of truth, but I am mainly concerned with how they work in communities formed around confessing and embodying the Gospel.

How then do we know God in all this?

We Christians *begin* to know God only as the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ claims us (embraces and transforms us) in our confessional starting point (just as we are), and our initial knowledge of God receives all the confirmation, illumination and correction it could conceivably hope to gain as we participate actively in a responsibly confessing community (i.e., one drawn to embody that communion for all others, now and always).

As we'll hear more about next week, the kind of God we know as Christians corresponds to the way we know God—a God whose absoluteness is defined in terms of unsurpassable relationality.

The Communion of *God's* Spirit in Jesus Christ: Doctrine of God

Lecture Notes
Charles W. Allen

Hodgson/King, 60-87
Thistlethwaite, 97-115
McGrath, 239-256; 292-316

How do we know God?

We Christians *begin* to know God only as the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ claims us (embraces and transforms us) in our confessional starting point (just as we are), and our initial knowledge of God receives all the confirmation, illumination and correction it could conceivably hope to gain as we participate actively in a responsibly confessing community (i.e., one drawn to embody that communion for all others, now and always).

What kind of God do we know?

The kind of God we know as Christians corresponds to the way we know God—a God whose absoluteness is defined in terms of unsurpassable relationality.

My intent in saying this here is not to make God any less absolute, any less "God." It is to say that our secular or philosophical notions of the "absolute" or "ultimate reality" have to be challenged and re-defined by the God we have begun to know, from our confessional starting point, in the Biblical narratives and especially in the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ. The God we know in this way is still, most emphatically, God. And there is no other "God" above, behind, or beyond this God (sorry, Paul Tillich).

Nevertheless, philosophical theology has its place: by borrowing and critiquing God-talk from surrounding cultures it may offer us any number of credible ideas about God's abstract "essence" or "nature", i.e., *what* God is (or at least might be). They may even make the existence of something like God look more credible to some of us, if not to everybody. Charles Hartshorne is a good example of this.

But faith is not simply a matter of assenting to ideas about God's nature. It is a matter of responding with all that we are—not just to ideas about what or whether God is, but to *whom* God is for us here and now and how all of us got to this point. And that requires telling and weaving together all kinds of truthful stories first, and only then looking to more "generic" ideas about God, human beings, etc., letting them illuminate those stories, but not letting them take over.

Let's take a moment and look at one traditional way of coming at the concept of God somewhat generically, to see some of its strengths and weaknesses.

According to Augustine, and later Anselm, God is "that than which no greater can be conceived," i.e., the being greater than any other conceivable being.

Such a being, they concluded, must possess all "great-making" properties to the fullest extent that they could conceivably be possessed all at once by a single being. (Note that "greater than" can mean "bigger than," "better than" or both.)

Fine. But Augustine at least noticed that people can disagree about a) which properties are truly great-making (See Augustine *On Christian Doctrine*, I.7) and b) which great-making properties are compatible with each other. So this doesn't settle anything.

Many classical theists have contended that such a being must be the most powerful of all, affecting all others unsurpassably, while remaining immutable, beyond being affected in any real way by any others. So God was held to be incapable of genuine compassion. The reasoning here was apparently that, yes, compassion may be a great-making property in its own right, but it was not nearly as great-making as immutability. So compassion had to go. Thus Anselm: "Thou art compassionate in terms of our experience, and not compassionate in terms of thy being ... because thou art affected by no sympathy for wretchedness" (*Proslogion*, VIII).

So what did they do with all the Biblical stories that portray God as one who can be affected and even changed by us? Those have to be taken more figuratively, they said. So in effect they admitted that their concept of God could not do equal justice to all the portrayals of God in the Bible, and that's a very telling admission.

But our century has produced some revisionary theists. Not all of them are process theologians, though they're the most familiar. But Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Jurgen Moltmann and Joe Jones belong here too, along with Clark Williamson and Marjorie Suchocki. Unlike Augustine or Anselm, they regard being unsurpassably affected by all others as a property every bit as great-making as immutability and the ability to affect all others unsurpassably. And they contend (at least Schubert Ogden does) that all these properties are compatible if we make a distinction between God's nature (or essence: "**what** God is") and God's actuality (**how** this God exists from one moment to the next). God's nature is indeed immutable, and the fact that God exists with certain essential properties is likewise an immutable truth, but God's actuality is unsurpassably "mutable" (and thus really capable of compassion).

Obviously, this doesn't do equal justice to all the Biblical portrayals of God either, but I suspect it does justice to more of them than the classical model, and it certainly seems closer to the Gospel.

I tend to side with this revisionary group, but the challenge here is to put all this in the context from which our faith actually arises, the problem being that you can get so caught up in debating abstractions that you forget why any of them might have mattered.

We are not responding to what God is or how this God exists from one moment to the next, but to *whom* God is and has been in communion with us here and now and with all that has brought us to this point.

In other words, given the inescapability of our confessional starting point, the only kind of God we *can* know is one who can be truly present *as God* in such relative circumstances as ours.

But this (according to Barth, Rahner, and before them, Hegel) is precisely the point of Nicea, Chalcedon (you'd better know or learn quickly what those two terms mean),

and any decent sacramental theology: that the absolute can be, in some way, absolutely present in the relative.

This point of course seems to require that we redefine what "absolute" means: even the absolute, as absolute, must be in some sense relative or (better?) "relational." But this is actually truer to the root meaning of "absolute": Literally, the word means "absolved," "freed"¹ (remember that absolution comes after confession in the daily office). It does not have to mean "aloof," "immutable," and it can't mean "unrelational." In fact, if we say God, or God's character is freed, the first question I want ask is, "Freed from what, by whom and for what?" Those are relational questions.

The short answer, as best I can give it, is, "Freed from external limitations, freed by (who else?) God, and freed for (what else?) communion with each and every one of us."

Thus (in agreement with process thought) God's absoluteness can be understood not as opposed to relativity but as an unsurpassable form of relativity: God is the one who, unlike any creature, lives in relation to *all* others (not just some), and whose relation to them is (as St. Augustine put it) nearer to them than they are to themselves.

It is precisely *because* God is so near to us that we must somewhat paradoxically confess that God is utterly unlike anything else we know. (As Karl Rahner put it, the incomprehensible mystery of God lies not in God's remoteness but in God's "radical proximity.")

God's eternity can likewise be understood not as sheer timelessness but as an unsurpassable form of temporality in which a settled past and an open future "interpermeate" within a living present.

What does this have to do with the Trinity?

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" 2 Cor. 12:13. This is the earliest Trinitarian formula, most scholars think. Note that it does not refer to God as "Father," though of course Paul does quite frequently.

The rendition of the Gospel I keep promoting is intended to lean in a Trinitarian direction. But it is definitely pre-Nicene. It aims to preserve the first Christians' tendencies to weave the living Jesus, the Spirit, God, and themselves into such an intimate communion that nobody could get too clear on precisely who or what went where. There is in this Biblical cluster of testimonies an irreducible, eccentric and broken plurality, yet ultimately a stubbornly unvanquished relationality—all of which

¹ I am indebted to Peter C. Hodgson for this point in his *Winds of the Spirit* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 147.

legitimately prompts *and* subverts later generations' attempts to sort things out too definitively.²

That is why my preferred rendition of the Gospel pivots around the term “communion,” in an effort to emphasize both the plurality and relationality of these earliest witnesses. I want to suggest that even God (the “Father”), the Spirit and Jesus Christ are who they are only in the context of that communion—a communion that they are well-pleased to see going far beyond just them to call forth and embrace all creation and finally even us.

That does not make communion a further reality (a fourth member of the Trinity?) behind or altogether beyond who they are, or even who we are. Communion, as mutual indwelling, interpermeation, *perichoresis*, etc., simply does not work that way. Nevertheless, my emphasis on communion does aim to make it just as much a focus of Christian contemplation and action as any persons involved, whether divine or creaturely. My hope is that this will help subvert our temptations to turn any “classic” accounts of that communion into another trump card.

And that is why the term comes first in “the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ,” and why I tend to use that entire phrase in places where I might once have simply spoken of God, the Spirit, Jesus Christ or even the Trinity—not to supplant these, by any means, but to return them to a more dynamic context and meaning. It’s a habit I recommend to you as well: try using it as often as you can.

This certainly does make me some kind of Trinitarian. But as I said, the Gospel that claims me most radically is decidedly pre-Nicene, more closely reflecting the fluidity of earliest Christian testimonies (with little concern for what might qualify as *the* earliest). So while I consider myself a celebrant of Nicene and Chalcedonian orthodoxy, I am not a staunch defender of either.

What I celebrate in them is where they resisted the temptation (better than their competitors) to sort things out too neatly, yet still managed to say something illuminating.

With Nicea I can readily say that in encountering the “realistic narrative” of Jesus’ ministry and destiny we encounter no less than “true God from true God,” “of one being with” the one Jesus called “the Father.”

With Chalcedon I can readily say that the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ is, to paraphrase, a relationship of unity without confusion and distinction without separation (i.e., a relationship of interpermeation).

But these councils also seem to have fallen prey to the neatly-sorting-out temptation as well, frightened as they were at the very idea that the Divine might suffer. Most of their current, self-appointed defenders have done a better job of keeping everything more

² I first began to appreciate this after reading James D. G. Dunn’s *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), in early 1978. It helped to resolve a number of troubling issues my first year in seminary was posing for me. Dunn’s insight was later taken up and developed in an even more pluralistic direction in David Tracy’s *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981). See especially pp. 248-304. Interestingly, this book’s appearance coincided with my first year at Chicago.

relational, the ironic thing being that precisely for that reason they would all doubtless have been anathematized by the original councils, as would I.

To emphasize communion in this way is already to introduce a note of eccentricity into this Gospel. We are, after all, speaking of a God whose very self is not a private, self-contained commodity but an open dynamism of self-giving to us in creation and redemption: at once the Giver, the Gift and the Giving.³

A God whose very self does not exist behind but in and through the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ is thus a God whose self is centered eccentrically.

The practical upshot of this is that both we and God are truly ourselves only in true communion with true others (indeed a self *is* such a communion). And we thus know no other God than a God of "otherness."

But to speak of eccentricity alone doesn't go far enough. The God we know in Jesus Christ is a God whose self is centered not only eccentrically but brokenly.

I'll repeat here something I said earlier: The God who eccentrically created this eccentric world out of uncoerced love is also the God who follows that world into brokenness and actually embraces brokenness in God's own life in order to mend and transform ours.

Here is where I would direct attention to McGrath's helpful overview in the section, "Can God Suffer?" (pp. 248-256).

We've only introduced the doctrine of the Trinity at this point. We'll be coming back to it week after week, especially in our discussions of Christology and Pneumatology. But I want to raise one more point, namely, the way in which God gives God's very selfhood over to the courses communion actually takes in history.

There are some very abstract things we can say about God without telling any stories overtly. They may give us some idea of *what* God is and *whether* God is. But only immersion in history can supply *who* God is, even, I suggest, for God. That is why the stories of Israel, of Jesus Christ, and other stories of liberation and redemption are never optional trappings—not for our knowledge of God, and not for God's own sense of selfhood. Yes, that's mind-boggling, but it just might be the Gospel.

Once again, the God we know as Christians corresponds to the way we know God. That is what Nicea affirmed, and what Arius had (perhaps inadvertently) denied.

Final words on expansive language for God

I do fervently believe that the *exclusive* use of male pronouns and male imagery for God is oppressive in subtle but far-reaching ways. We need other ways to speak of God that don't reinforce a patriarchal worldview.

³For a fruitful development of the terminology of self-giving, see Stephen H. Webb, *The Gifting God: A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). I did not borrow this terminology directly from Webb. I borrowed it first from a doxology by Brian Wren, set to the hymntune *Lasst uns erfreuen*: "Praise God the Giver and the Gift. / Hearts, minds and voices now uplift: / Alleluia, alleluia. / Praise, praise the Breath of glad surprise, / freeing, uplifting, opening eyes: / Three-in-oneness, Love communing, / Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia." See Wren, *Bring Many Names* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Hope Publishing Co., 1989), no. 35a. It is only fitting that a poet gets the principal credit here.

Along with a growing number of feminists, I don't necessarily have a problem with retaining the language of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit," and even giving it a place of honor in worship. That is because in the dynamism of Trinitarian relations even these terms take on a subversive and liberating twist that some of their defenders may not have noticed.

But the point of that is, if we are to remain faithful to the trajectory the Trinity outlines, we have no right to make this the sole, exclusive formula. And ideally no service of worship would use only those terms.

My preference for "the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ" is obvious enough. I've also spoken of the "Giver, the Gift and the Giving." St. Augustine spoke of the "Lover, the Beloved and their Love." "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer" has its problems, but not serious ones if used alongside more traditional formulations. One of the most popular formulas these days is "Father, Son and Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all." I could make a whole lecture on this subject alone, so I'll stop here.

Eccentricity and Brokenness: Creation, Providence & Evil

Lecture Notes
Charles W. Allen

Hodgson/King, 118-146

Thistlethwaite, 143-172

McGrath, 257-279

Why I don't stock certain books

At the CTS Bookstore we order practically anything if asked, but that doesn't mean we regularly stock everything. To stock something would be to take it seriously and perhaps promote it, and there are ideas out there that even we ecumenical types cannot take seriously and will not promote. Remember, ecumenism doesn't mean affirming every viewpoint, pretending to be neutral—and we are definitely not neutral.

Different customers over the years have chided me for not carrying books promoting “scientific creationism” and books like *A Course in Miracles*. I've ordered both types, but I won't stock them.

I won't stock books promoting “scientific creationism,” because I, with the CTS Faculty, believe such books encourage serious confusions about the legitimate place of scientific inquiry in our world, and they encourage a “magical” view of the Bible.

I won't stock books like *A Course in Miracles*, because they teach that the physical world is an illusion of our own making, and they try to pass this off as a Christian view. I'm also a bit skeptical about books that claim to be directly channeled, dictated by a mysterious voice, as *A Course in Miracles* supposedly was. (“This is a course in miracles. Please take notes”⁴—That's at least as silly as a dictation-view of Biblical inspiration.) There might be a place for that in the “World Religions” section, but not in “Spiritual Formation” or “Theology.”

I do stock and promote books that encourage critical dialogue with these viewpoints, but I believe our job as Christians is to promote a healthy doctrine of Creation, and that requires standing elsewhere.

Creation

The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* can look awfully speculative, and sometimes the debates it fosters seem only remotely related to the meaning of the Gospel.

Here is a quick summary of what I think Christians should be trying to say:

The world (physical or otherwise) is an *embodiment* of the eccentric and broken communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ.

God's creation of “heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen” is the promotion of differences beyond our wildest imagination for the sake of an unimaginably enriched communion.

⁴ The story of Helen Schucman, the author of *A Course in Miracles*, is told, quite uncritically, by Robert Skutch in *Journey Without Distance* (Berkeley: Celestial Arts, 1984). The quote is from p. 54.

I suggest that this promotion of differences implies wanting genuine novelty and unpredictability, not just for us but for God. It is God's free creation of even more freedom. And we'll never quite understand this, just as we'll never quite understand our own freedom, much less God's.

The world is not God; it is *different* from God; most of it is also, thankfully, different from us, and we are not its center.

That difference is good (or at least it could have been—it's broken now).

The world is a *gift* from God. As a gift, it is given willingly, joyfully, and somewhat surprisingly by God, not arbitrarily, grudgingly or automatically. (But that is not to say that we can seriously imagine God having decided not to create.)

The world is a *sacrament* of the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ. It's own eccentricity and brokenness embodies the real presence of that eccentric and broken communion.

And because the world is what it is only in relation to that communion, it can be loved for its own sake, and for God's sake, at the same time. (Augustine sometimes got this point right, but often got it wrong.)

As one of my favorite daily prayers implies, yes, we are to love God above all things, but also in all things—the two do not have to be in competition.

Our assigned white male theologians (in Hodgson & King) have tried to preserve this basic outlook (with the exception of Spinoza a very religious inquirer whose pantheism [look it up!] got him kicked out of his synagogue). Tillich's opening paragraph (p.141) probably states this part best.

Providence

Etymologically, providence refers to how God provides for the world, and for us. It is the conviction that God really is working on our behalf, that God is still God, despite all the evident brokenness in our lives and our world, and that nothing can rob us of the ultimate good God desires for us.

In terms of the Gospel it refers to some of the ways in which the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ both embraces us as we are and draws us to embody that communion more fully.

“God works with the world as it is in order to bring it to where it can be.” Who said that? While events may seem random and chaotic, and while there is genuine, unpredictable novelty, nothing happens just by chance.

Nothing happens independently of God's working, though much happens contrary to God's working.

Put another way, nothing escapes the embrace of God's communion, but much resists its drawing influence, and communion can be and often is broken.

But even a broken communion cannot be escaped, at least not when it's God's communion.

I'm not as sure as some process philosophers are that we can sort out (even conceptually) what part of my activity is mine and what part is God's. I prefer to say that they interpermeate “without confusion or separation” (is that a cop-out? I'm not sure).

Evil

Eccentricity characterizes the goodness of a world where differences multiply unpredictably. But the only world we've ever known is not all sweetness and light. So we have to speak of brokenness as well. And we have to admit that we've never known any moments of eccentric goodness that were not at least haunted by brokenness.

Whether God has known anything different may not be too useful a question to ask. At least in this world God does not escape brokenness either but has made it a vital part of who God is for us.

Asking how God can be God, and be good, in the midst of genuine evil has traditionally been called "theodicy"—a justification of the ways of God.

It's often said that theodicy trivializes evil. I suppose it does. But then what words about evil would not trivialize it?

Let's agree that doing something about evil is more important than talking about it. But sometimes what we say or have heard said about it can paralyze us, and we need to learn how to say things differently in order to get on with our lives.

In a sermon I once quoted the American philosopher William James at a point where he almost sounds like a liberation theologian: "While a whole host of guileless and thoroughfeds thinkers are unveiling reality and the absolute and explaining away evil and pain, this is the condition of the only beings known to us anywhere in the universe with a developed consciousness of what the universe is. What these people experience *is* reality."

This from a philosopher. His principal target, though, was not Christian theologians but "theosophists"—the spiritual ancestors of *A Course in Miracles* and a host of other new age outlooks that tell you that evil isn't real, that any pain or frustration you suffer is ultimately all your fault. You don't have to change anything in the world, just the way you look at the world.

As usual, looking at an old sermon I find myself liking it maybe a little too much, but here's what I said about fifteen years ago, and I guess I still believe it.

"In spite of all the evils Christianity itself has unleashed on the world these past 2,000 years, one thing we can't accuse it of is pretending evil isn't there.

"Theologians will always and should always try to explain how a good God and suffering can exist at the same time. But no one can explain suffering away.

"James is right. For the majority of people in our world suffering isn't a topic of conversation—it's a way of life. It's become a way of life for more and more Americans, ever since our government decided making the rich richer and more military spending would solve all our problems.

"We need to listen to advice from Rabbi Irving Greenberg. Thinking of his people's near extinction in this century of so-called progress, he insists that 'no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children'. (Try spouting *A Course in Miracles* in *that* context.)

"Maybe we should be grateful that Jesus never gave an explanation for suffering. Instead he presented us with a God who suffers with us and for us—a crucified God

“That’s no explanation, but somehow, in the face of all the suffering haunting every day from Jesus’ time to ours, the church has found his [presentation] carrying power and courage that no explanation could match.”

Here ends the sermon (or a portion of it anyway).

Let’s put theodicy in its place: God calls us, not to despair at the brokenness we find in the world and in ourselves, but to mend that brokenness by embodying the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ.

One purpose of theodicy is to convince us that we are not to remain passive about this: evil requires our resistance.

Theodicy also serves to remind us that we can’t play God, either.

Addendum I: Response to "Scientific" Creationism

I’m not in a position to weigh all the (purportedly) scientific arguments put forward by so-called scientific creationists, whether in favor of their version of creation or against evolutionary theories. (For a helpful discussion of both scientific and theological issues, see Langdon Gilkey’s *Creationism on Trial: Evolution and God at Little Rock* [Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985].) I’m convinced that they are pretty confused about the nature and limits of both the natural sciences *and* theology.

My objections to scientific creationism are more religious and theological: Their entire motivation stems from a view of Scripture that I don’t think can find support from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I’ve already gone over my view of biblical authority, and obviously it doesn’t match theirs. But I still insist: *if the Gospel (not some rarefied theory of biblical inspiration) remains the principal norm by which we interpret the world, and if it had been more consistently used throughout the history of the church, we would never have been troubled by theories like Darwin’s and his heirs.* We would never have felt the need to insist that Genesis tells us how life arose in the world.

As I said earlier, Scripture needs to be accurate enough about things in general for us to continue to trust in and live by the Gospel, but that’s all. If the biblical writers borrowed local myths and reworked them to make some profound theological points, so what? It would be another matter if they failed to give us a recognizable portrait of Jesus, but I think they did a good enough job on that.

There may be all sorts of holes in this or that evolutionary theory. But that doesn’t mean that biologists should stop trying to understand how processes we see at work today were involved in the development of life in the first place. That’s their job. To ask them to factor in how God was involved in that process would be to ask them to step out of their field. It’s no fault of theirs that God doesn’t get mentioned.

On the other hand, if any biologists put forward an account of human origins that *disallowed* the activity of God, I would have to object that they have overstepped the limits of their discipline. On that point I do have to sympathize with the creationists. And occasionally you do find biologists, physicists and the like acting as if their training somehow qualified them to make pronouncements about God and just about anything else.

Furthermore, I can agree with creationists that any account of life that didn’t include God’s activity is in some respects incomplete.

But a complete account *in every respect* would have to involve different *levels* or angles of approach, and I’m not sure the creationists appreciate that.

If you described a book in terms of its chemical make-up, you might have given a complete description as far as chemistry goes, but you’d have missed something crucial if you stopped there.

A complete description *in every respect* would have to include some account of what the author *said*. You’d have to shift from the chemical level to the literary level. And it *is* a shift. You can’t get to the literary level no matter how far you try to refine a chemical

analysis. In a similar way, a complete account of life *in every respect* has to include an account of the life God shares with us. But you have to shift gears.

Biology, physics and astronomy can't get you to God no matter how far you push them.

Addendum II: Calvin on Providence

Most of the time Calvin says only that nothing happens apart from God's will. That's no problem. Even Hartshorne and Whitehead can say that much. But Calvin goes much further: "[Creatures] are governed by God's secret plan in such a way that *nothing happens except what is knowingly and willingly decreed by him*" (*Institutes*, p. 201, emphasis added). Put positively, this says that, *anything that happens is knowingly and willingly decreed by God*. And it's clear from the context that "anything" really means "anything." If it happens that I obey God, then God has decreed it. If it happens that I disobey God, then God has decreed that too.

Calvin goes on to rail against those who devised the distinction between God's doing and permitting: "It seems absurd to them for man, who will soon be punished for his blindness, to be blinded by God's will and command. Therefore they escape by the shift that this is done only with God's permission, but not also by his will; but he, openly declaring that he is the doer, repudiates that evasion. However, that *men ... cannot by deliberating accomplish anything except what he has already decreed with himself and determines by his secret direction*, is proved by innumerable and clear testimonies" (p. 229, emphasis added).

Calvin grants that to us it may *appear* that "there are in [God] two contrary wills, because by his secret plan he decrees what he has openly forbidden by his law" (p. 233). But it only seems that way. God's will "is one and simple in him," but we mere mortals cannot grasp how that is possible. Thus, "when we do not grasp how *God wills to take place what he forbids to be done*, let us recall our mental incapacity, and at the same time consider that the light in which God dwells is not without reason called unapproachable, because it is overspread with darkness" (p. 234, emphasis added). I think one can understand why Hartshorne used to say that a "mystery" is apparently what a contradiction becomes when it is about God.

Calvin refines his point by introducing a distinction between God's will (or decree) and God's precept (or command). But the fact remains: when we disobey God's precepts, "God wills to take place what he forbids to be done." In other words, God specifically wills our disobedience, and then holds us accountable for something we couldn't help doing. True, Calvin also says that we disobey willingly (see p.217), but even our will to disobey is decreed by God.

If this sounds abhorrent, let me say in Calvin's defense that he is only drawing conclusions that seem inescapable, given the assumptions of classical theism: this world is *solely* the result of God's free decision to create, and that decision includes every moment in this world, in every respect, from beginning to end. So-called secondary causes are introduced as means by which that decision is made effectual, but those means are themselves in total conformity to the primary cause (God's will). Calvin is also more consistent than most classical theists (including Arminius) in rejecting the idea that foreknowledge could be the cause of election (or any other decree).

Eccentricity, Brokenness & Embrace: Humanity, Sin & Grace

Lecture Notes
Charles W. Allen

Hodgson/King, 147-204

Thistlethwaite, 173-192

McGrath, 422-458

We've already looked at the ideas of creation, providence and evil in general. This week's topic narrows the focus to the place of humanity in all of this and begins to talk about redemption or grace.

I hope this session will convince all of us how some of the gloomier traditional doctrines like "original sin" and "total depravity" were often closer to the deepest truths about us than some of the nicer-sounding pictures of ourselves we'd rather believe.

But it's important to find the right balance here. We're still talking about Good News.

From the standpoint of the Gospel, I want to suggest that we know more about our brokenness than anything else, but that we are free to know brokenness for what it is, in its full extent, precisely because we are embraced and drawn by the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ.

Put more traditionally, we don't know what sin is until we've at least glimpsed what grace is.

As with the idea of creation, the ideas of sin and grace are bound up with divine and creaturely freedom. Since we can't even describe creaturely freedom without puzzlement, we're bound to get even more puzzled bringing God onto the scene. I've said this before but probably can't remind you of it too often.

I've said that God creates willingly, joyfully, and surprisingly (not arbitrarily, grudgingly or automatically) for the sake of an ever-richer communion.

God creates creatures to do the same: to respond to God willingly, joyfully and surprisingly (not arbitrarily, grudgingly or automatically) for the sake of an ever-richer communion.

In other words God creates creatures to reflect, in their own eccentric ways, the eccentric relationality that God already is, becoming true selves only in true communion with true others, each of us in our own way eccentric centers of our shared worlds.

Whatever else creation in "the image of God" may mean, it surely means this eccentric relationality.

But somehow all this got twisted and broken, and still gets twisted and broken, every time we respond to God.

We find our eccentric relationality too suspenseful to endure, and out of that natural anxiety we wind up trying to make ourselves the uneccentric centers of our own closed, private, unrelational worlds.

In a sense, we try to become God, and at the same time to hide from God.

What is especially ironic here is that the God we try to become and hide from bears little resemblance to the God revealed in the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ.

So it is not only our own eccentric relationality that we deny, but God's eccentric relationality as well. We don't want to be that way, and we don't want God to be that way either. So we rebel.

Thus, as the Biblical narratives suggest, in some perverse way we and our ancestors have "willingly, joyfully and surprisingly" responded in ways that *break*, rather than enhance, the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ.

And a tragic consequence is that those responses tend to make our further responses increasingly arbitrary, grudging and automatic in a viciously downward spiral.

(Genesis 2-12 depicts this on several fronts.) The more we rebel against eccentric relationality, the less "centered" we become.

Such responses happened before humans arrived on the scene (remember the serpent?).

So creation's communion was already tilted toward further breakage, making our sin practically inevitable. (In the most trivial theoretical sense, our sin may not have been logically necessary, but in practical terms this is little consolation.)

By the time we become aware enough of our own complicity in this downward spiral to want to do anything about it, we find our attempts to rescue ourselves largely adding to the problem, not solving it, and part of the agony is that we can see this happening, which tempts us even more to despair.

This downward spiral strikes us, when we're honest, both as an alien intrusion into who we are, and as very much a part of who we are (Paul's reflections in Romans 7:7b-25a are quite apt here). We are not solely responsible for it, but we do share responsibility, and we feel trapped even though we at least know we're trapped.

Traditionally, Christian theologians have introduced concepts like "original sin," "temptation" and "total depravity" to point to this complex dynamic. Taken "symbolically" or "metaphorically," these point at the very least to quite real moments in our own self-awareness (which is never simply "given" but always the result of interpretation).

Once again, however, as with doctrines about God and Jesus Christ, theologians and church leaders too often succumbed to the "neatly sorting-out" temptation and fell into endless debates and divisions. Many of these are instructive, but we need to approach all of them with a healthier sense of the elusiveness of any terms we use to speak of this mysterious dynamic.

The same applies to our speaking of grace, and we need to return to that even more mysterious dynamic to put everything in perspective.

A pithy quote from Paul Ricoeur (in Hodgeson, pp. 197-198): "That freedom must be delivered, and that this deliverance is deliverance from self-enslavement cannot be said directly; yet it is the central theme of 'salvation'."

In Romans 7:15-20, St. Paul keeps using the paradoxical expression: "I-yet-not-I-but-sin," to give voice to the elusive dynamic that keeps him from doing the very thing he wants and does not want to do.

In Galatians 2:19-20 we find a contrasting expression which is equally paradoxical: "I have been crucified with Christ. And it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." Now the formula is "I-yet-not-I-but-Christ."

So we're driven to say again, when we consider God's activity in relation to ours, there is no way we can sort out neatly just what part belongs to God and what part belongs to us. We must distinguish them, but they still interpermeate more intimately than we can imagine.

So, like our own role, God's role in creation remains elusive; in providence it remains elusive; in our "fallenness" it remains elusive; and in our redemption it remains most elusive of all.

As in creation, so in redemption we must say that God redeems willingly, joyfully, and surprisingly (not arbitrarily, grudgingly or automatically) for the sake of an ever-richer communion.

So like creation, redemption comes to us as a gift.

And what is given can be called redemption, grace, salvation, etc., but these are only different facets of the most fundamental gift, namely, the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ.

Since Pelagius' day, most Christians have been able to agree on at least that much.

Most Christians have also been able to agree that this gift calls us to respond with faithfulness and gratitude, though even our very ability to respond is never simply ours alone but ours in the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ.

No Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed or Arminian spokesperson has ever believed that redemption could be *bought* by "good works." But all have believed that part of the intent of God's redemption is that we should live better lives.

Catholics have tended to say that grace makes us able to merit God's acceptance, but ultimately our meriting is itself a gift from God.

Protestants have tended to say that none of our responses to grace get us any closer to meriting God's acceptance: our "good works" are never *that* good, and they don't have to be. We are always *simul iustus et peccator*.

If the Catholic emphasis is misunderstood, the result can be "works righteousness" or Pelagianism, and dishonesty about where we are. But that is not what Catholics intend to teach.

If the Protestant emphasis is misunderstood, the result can be complacency or "cheap grace," and dishonesty about what we can do. But that is not what Protestants intend to teach.

All agree that the Gospel presents us with both a gift and a demand, and that in some paradoxical sense the gift is a demand and the demand is a gift.

As I have tried to say it, the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ embraces us just as we are. That's the gift aspect.

But it also draws us to embody that communion for all others. That's the demand aspect. It will not leave us unchanged, even though it does not control how we change.

What God's gift draws from us is not a return payment, but more self-giving, and giving not aimed directly back at God but indirectly (eccentrically) at the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ, where love of God and neighbor remain inseparable.⁵

⁵ On this see Stephen H. Webb, *The Gifting God: A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 139-158.

The Communion of God's Spirit in *Jesus Christ*: Christology

Lecture Notes
Charles W. Allen

Hodgson/King, 205-236

Thistlethwaite, 193-220

McGrath, 319-420

Some working principles:

All the puzzles of Christology, like practically all the other puzzles we've encountered so far, stem once again from the first Christians' tendencies to weave the living Jesus, the Spirit, God, and themselves into such an intimate communion that nobody could get too clear on precisely who or what went where.

For these Christians, to be embraced by the communion of God's Spirit was to be in Jesus Christ, and to have Jesus Christ in them.

They called Jesus "the Christ" (the Messiah, the anointed one) because they were convinced that Jesus' risen, indwelling and embracing presence had something to do with fulfilling Israel's messianic hopes, even though they admitted there was still more to come.

They called this present one "Jesus" because they were convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was one and the same as the one among and in them now, even though he had been executed.

They made that connection because Jesus had mysteriously, elusively, but convincingly appeared to some of his earliest followers as the risen and exalted one shortly after his death.

And they found the manner in which he appeared and remained with them to be mysterious enough that they could not simply call him "the Christ" without calling him "Lord," for somehow his presence and the presence of God were one and the same.

I believe that these earliest convictions, though difficult to pin down, are still credible today, that the confession, "Jesus Christ is Lord," is good news especially for marginalized people, and that it can be heard as good news even by Jews, Buddhists, Muslims and others who remain faithful to their own traditions.

.....

I'm going to repeat here some points I made in the lecture on God: "while I consider myself a celebrant of Nicene and Chalcedonian orthodoxy, I am not a staunch defender of either.

"What I celebrate in them is where they resisted the temptation (better than their competitors) to sort things out too neatly, yet still managed to say something illuminating.

"With Nicea I can readily say that in encountering the 'realistic narrative' of Jesus' ministry and destiny we encounter no less than 'true God from true God', 'of one being with' the one Jesus called 'the Father'.

“With Chalcedon I can readily say that the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ is, to paraphrase, a relationship of unity without confusion and distinction without separation (i.e., a relationship of interpermeation [or *perichoresis*]).

“But these councils also seem to have fallen prey to the neatly-sorting-out temptation as well, frightened as they were at the very idea that the Divine might suffer. Most of their current, self-appointed defenders have done a better job of keeping everything more relational, the ironic thing being that precisely for that reason they would all doubtless have been anathematized by the original councils, as would I.

“To emphasize communion in this way is already to introduce a note of eccentricity into this Gospel. We are, after all, speaking of a God whose very self is not a private, self-contained commodity but an open dynamism of self-giving to us in creation and redemption: at once the Giver, the Gift and the Giving.⁶

“A God whose very self does not exist behind but in and through the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ is thus a God whose self is centered eccentrically.

“The practical upshot of this is that both we and God are truly ourselves only in true communion with true others (indeed a self *is* such a communion). And we thus know no other God than a God of ‘otherness’”—a God of “eccentric relationality.”

In many current debates on christology we are often presented with the question whether the heart of Christian faith is theocentric or christocentric. In light of what I’ve been saying, I consider these false alternatives.

At the risk of sounding too cute, I’ve said that the heart of Christian faith is both “theo-eccentric” and “christo-eccentric.”

It’s theo-eccentric because the God we know in Jesus Christ is not a God whose selfhood exists apart from God’s self-giving in creation and redemption. Even God’s self is centered eccentrically.

It’s christo-eccentric because, even though we can regard Jesus of Nazareth as a pivotal moment in God’s self-giving, he does not exhaust all that happens “for us and for our salvation” in the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ.

And that is once again why I prefer this entire phrase: we should encourage ourselves and one another to stop thinking of God, the Spirit, Jesus, or even ourselves apart from the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ, which involves “unity without confusion and distinction without separation” (the Chalcedonian formula, in case you’ve forgotten).

.....

That’s one way to approach christology. It’s not the only way or even the only “orthodox” way.

⁶For a fruitful development of the terminology of self-giving, see Stephen H. Webb, *The Gifting God: A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). I did not borrow this terminology directly from Webb. I borrowed it first from a doxology by Brian Wren, set to the hymntune *Lasst uns erfreuen*: "Praise God the Giver and the Gift. / Hearts, minds and voices now uplift: / Alleluia, alleluia. / Praise, praise the Breath of glad surprise, / freeing, uplifting, opening eyes: / Three-in-oneness, Love communing, / Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia." See Wren, *Bring Many Names* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Hope Publishing Co., 1989), no. 35a. It is only fitting that a poet gets the principal credit here.

George Lindbeck has detected three fundamental principles underlying the decisions of Nicea and Chalcedon and has proposed that we use these, instead of the precise wording of those creeds, to see if what we want to say today preserves enough continuity with the faith of our forbears.

He labels these principles a) the monotheistic principle, b) the principle of historical specificity, and c) the principle of christological maximalism. He defines them as follows:

- a) The Monotheistic Principle: “there is only one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus.”
- b) The Principle of Historical Specificity: “the stories of Jesus refer to a genuine human being who was born, lived, and died in a particular time and place.”
- c) The Principle of Christological Maximalism: “every possible importance is to be ascribed to Jesus that is not inconsistent with the first rules.”⁷

I encourage you to look at the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds in terms of these rules, and at my own reflections on christology.

.....

A Further Thought Experiment on the Person & Work of Christ

God has always lived and suffered as one with us, and will always do so. This is an essential part of God’s redemptive work.

God has so *identified* God’s very own *self* with Jesus of Nazareth that God now lives and suffers, not only as one *with* us, but as one *of* us. This also is an essential part of God’s redemptive work.

It is furthermore pivotal in that it introduces a new and crucial dimension into the way God lives and suffers as one with us. There is, at least in some sense (but maybe not in every sense), a “before” and “after” in the history of God’s life with us.

Does this make other things God has done for us less pivotal by comparison?

In some cases, yes, but we can’t say in every case. As the doctrine of the Trinity reminds us, creation and redemption pivot around a center whose unity is multiple in ways we can’t pin down. If this doctrine makes any sense (a big “if”), then it makes sense to say that God’s redemptive work can pivot just as crucially around more than one event (though of course these other events would all be in some sense “one” just as the Trinity is “one”).

The expectation of eschatological fulfillment also prevents us from saying that what God did here is final in every sense (though it is of course final in many important senses—redemption has taken a new turn that can’t be undone).

That means, especially, that we don’t have to be supersessionists about what God did in Israel and still does in Judaism.

And we can be open to what God may be doing in other traditions that have no historical connection to ours—which includes taking them seriously even when they refuse to speak in terms of “God” or “redemption” or other terms we find inescapable.

⁷ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), p. 94.

However open we are, though, we don't have to hesitate to say that something of ultimate importance has happened here that has not happened anywhere else, and we believe others need to appreciate this just as much as we may need to appreciate their distinctive stories. That's not imperialistic.

For that reason, pluralist though I am, I can still pray the following collect in good conscience: "Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your name. Amen."

Could God have done this elsewhere? Could there be other "incarnations"?

No, at least not precisely this (though I'm not sure what "precisely" means here where language begins to get so elusive). The event that *makes* God one *of* us (in the sense we are talking about) can only happen once.

It's very much like losing one's virginity. God lost God's virginity in Jesus, and if it makes any sense for us to say that it happened there, it makes no sense for us even to ask if *precisely* the same thing could have happened elsewhere.

Did God have to do it this way?

Keep in mind that phrases like "have to" start looking peculiar when applied to God. Still let's say that God didn't have to do this in order to live and suffer redemptively as one *with* us.

But if God insists that our full redemption include God's living and suffering with us as one *of* us, then God did have to do this very thing at some point in history.

When we then ask why God might have insisted on this, we can try out some answers (e.g., it affirms our individual selfhood, etc.), but much of this is guesswork. What we begin with, and fall back on, however, is the church's conviction that God has declared this to be essential to our salvation in the fullest sense of the word.

What then is salvific about the cross of Jesus Christ?

Jesus' crucifixion is salvific simply because it is the crucifixion of the one with whom God has identified God's very own self. Jesus' resurrection and exaltation are no less salvific.

Is this an objective or subjective account of God's redemption?

Both. We are speaking about a turning point in the way God lives and suffers as one with us.

This is a turning point in the way we understand God's redemption (the subjective aspect).

But if we also accept that God's very selfhood is radically constituted by certain historical events, then this is also a turning point in God's own identity. If that is not objective (though maybe subjective for God) then I don't know what is.

What does it mean for God to identify God's own self with a human individual?

It means something much stronger than what we do when we identify ourselves with another person. What we do mostly in our imagination God does in reality. We might thus hazard to say that God is one whose selfhood is radically constituted by certain

events in the history of this world, e.g., the history of Israel, Jesus Christ, the Church, etc.

If we knew precisely how we come to have our own selfhood, we could say much more about what this means. But how we get our own selfhood is resistant to analysis.

For example, if the child born to my parents on 10-30-53, with all my physical characteristics, had been given up for adoption, would that child still be me?

In one sense he clearly would, yet in another sense he clearly would not. How are those two senses related? Is one more basic than the other?

There are many theories about this among philosophers, but little agreement. So at this point it seems best to call attention to our own perplexity in speaking of our own selfhood, in hopes of illuminating our perplexity about God's identity.

We do in fact seem to be saying something somewhat analogous about God. If the source of all that is had not shared a common history with Israel, Jesus Christ, the Church, etc., would this still be the same God? In one sense, maybe so, but in another sense maybe not.

This in part (and only in part) is what it means to say that God's very selfhood is radically constituted by such events.

We might say that we can have a bare inkling of *what* God is, in the most abstract sense of the term: God is "that than which no greater can be conceived," the source, ground and goal of all that is, etc.

But that does not begin to tell us *who* God is: to learn that you have to know God's story, and there's not a more crucial chapter in that story than the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ.

The Communion of God's *Spirit* in Jesus Christ: Pneumatology & Spirituality

Lecture Notes
Charles W. Allen

Hodgson/King, 295-322

Thistlethwaite, 251-264

McGrath, 279-288

Prichard

Let's look at an intriguing pattern: Hodgson/King starts with the heading, "The Spirit and the Christian Life," but there's not a single reading that focuses on "the Spirit." It's all about the Christian life, or spirituality.

Thistlethwaite at least is more honest: there's no section with the word "Spirit" in its heading. Oduyoye's essay falls in the section entitled "Church, Ministry, and Spirituality," and the essay again focuses on spirituality, not the Spirit.

Rebecca Prichard has found the same tendency among other feminist theologians—sustained reflection on spirituality, yes, but no sustained treatment of the Holy Spirit (I-1), hence the need for her forthcoming book.

McGrath puts his section on the Holy Spirit in his chapter on the doctrine of God. He begins it by admitting that "The doctrine of the Holy Spirit really deserves a full chapter in its own right." But he didn't give it a chapter, did he?

So what Rebecca Prichard found to be missing from feminist theologies seems to be pretty scarce in other theologies as well. There are noteworthy exceptions, of course, but they stand out as exceptions.

For some reason, theologians keep neglecting the Spirit. Even when they say we shouldn't, they wind up doing it anyway.

I've been guilty of this too, and I want to start today's lecture by looking at how I treated the doctrine of the Holy Spirit the last time I taught this course.

.....

Why the Holy Spirit gets neglected

In most theological traditions the Holy Spirit is almost an afterthought: The first version of the Nicene Creed, for example, barely mentions the Spirit before moving on to its list of "anathemas." Its later, Constantinopolitan version (the one churches recite) affirms the divinity and life-giving power of the Spirit but still sounds, despite theologians' claims to the contrary, as if the Spirit were a third-rate mode of God's being.

Explanations for this are not hard to imagine:

- a) While the Spirit is usually spoken of as the nearest (or most immanent) and most pervasive presence of God, the Spirit is also considered the most elusive, like a wind that "blows where it chooses" (John 3:8). Both the Spirit's elusiveness and pervasiveness make the usual personifying descriptions falter.
- b) The elusiveness of the Spirit is not only conceptually puzzling but institutionally threatening. While that can be liberating, it can also be disastrous.

c) Models and metaphors for the Trinity almost always use concrete nouns to speak of the “first” and “second” persons, but resort to abstract, verbal nouns speak of the Spirit: The Spirit seems to be more of a process or relation than a thing or person, not, e.g., the Lover or the Beloved but the Loving that binds the two, or the Giving that relates the Giver and the Gift. If you assume that a process or a relation is less “real” or “concrete” than a thing or a person, then you are bound to discount it.

... I now want to suggest that we turn the tables on traditional formulations and suggest that the Spirit, far from being an afterthought, is God in all God’s fullness.

I suggest that traditional thinking was right to speak of the Spirit as more of a “process” than a “thing”: The Holy Spirit makes communion possible within (among?) the God of Israel and Jesus Christ, within the world, within ourselves, and among all of these, simply because the Holy Spirit *is* communion in the fullest sense of the word. And as I have mentioned in passing before, communion is not just what God does but what and who God *is*.

Where traditional thinking went wrong was in assuming that a process like communion was less real or less concrete than the so-called things involved in the process. My suggestion (taking cues from process and feminist thinking) is that processes or activities are at least as real as any of the “things” involved in them.

.....

Now this might have seemed a promising beginning. But here is where I immediately changed the subject and went on to talk about spirituality, the church, sacraments, etc. To make matters worse, the rendition of the Gospel I had been using had not even referred directly to the Spirit. It spoke of God’s accepting and calling us in communion with Jesus Christ, and only after the lecture on Christology did I mention the Spirit by name.

I offered the lame excuse that the term “communion” contained an indirect reference to the Spirit—true, but not good enough.

So in other words, despite what I suggested in these few sentences, I didn’t turn any tables. I treated the Holy Spirit first as an afterthought and then as a transition to other topics related to spirituality.

...

It is partly from my conversations with Rebecca Prichard that I finally decided to restate the Gospel in terms that would make the Spirit harder to ignore.

So now the key phrase is, “the communion of God’s *Spirit* in Jesus Christ” and the grammar of that phrase makes “communion” and “Spirit” the two most prominent terms.

“Communion” is the principal noun, modified by the genitive phrase “of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ.”

That genitive phrase can be analyzed further: its principal noun is “Spirit,” which is modified by a genitive construction, “God’s,” and a dative phrase, “in Jesus Christ.”

We could try writing it thus: the communion [of (God’s) Spirit (in Jesus Christ)]. And we could read this both grammatically, from the outside in, and mathematically, from the inside out.

Reading from the inside out (mathematically) is the order of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, and there's nothing wrong with that order as long as it's not the only one.

Unfortunately, in most of Christian thinking, that *has* been the only order, or at least the predominant one.

But the Biblical testimonies in both testaments were always more versatile than that. There's no single formula, not in the New Testament and certainly not in its parent testament.

Once again I want to remind us of the first Christians' tendencies to weave the living Jesus, the Spirit, God, and themselves into such an intimate communion that nobody could get too clear on precisely who or what went where.

This means that playing around with traditional ways of ordering things may actually be more orthodox than "official" orthodoxies.

So I'm promoting the grammatical reading of this phrase—the communion [of (God's) Spirit (in Jesus Christ)]—to make orthodoxy more orthodox.

By doing this, I also want to endorse Rebecca Prichard's "preferential option" for "systemic" over "systematic" theology. I've wanted the approach in this course to be more of an example of the systemic genre—topics are connected, but not in as linear a fashion as the "textbooks" might suggest.

Systemic theology embodies the eccentric relationality of communion, where we should not expect, any more than the earliest Christians, to get too clear on precisely who or what goes where.

When you think further about the phrase, "the communion [of (God's) Spirit (in Jesus Christ)]," you may legitimately wonder if the Spirit still comes in second, after communion. After all, "Spirit" is in brackets, while "communion" isn't.

But keep in mind that it's all the bracketed stuff that tells us most decisively what "communion" means. That's another reason why we shouldn't get stuck with any one way of ordering things.

And "communion" has been most frequently associated with the Spirit, largely because Paul's phrase, "the communion of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor. 13:13), has become so familiar through its use in worship.

"Communion" also has affinities with Augustine's association of the Spirit with "the bond of love."

So I still endorse what I said several years ago: "the Holy Spirit *is* communion in the fullest sense of the word. And as I have mentioned in passing before, communion is not just what God does but what and who God *is*."

The Spirit thus epitomizes both eccentricity and relationality, and it is fundamentally because of the communion of the Spirit that God is truly God and Jesus Christ is Lord. That is why Christian faith should be described as both "theo-eccentric" and "Christo-eccentric."

Does that mean that I've put the Spirit at the center instead? Not at all, because the Spirit won't hold still for that. As Prichard says, "Spirit-centered reflection is actually a Spirit-encompassed, a Spirit-eccentric reflection" (p. 129).

The Spirit's eccentricity has been so evident that it is no surprise that Christians have often been puzzled about the Spirit's personhood—but that is partly because our definitions of personhood have usually overlooked the eccentric relationality that makes each of us truly ourselves.

Spirituality

“Spirituality” covers all the ways in which the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ draws us to embody that communion here and now.

As Rebecca Prichard underscores, spirituality is not opposed to embodiment. Indeed, one of the things that distinguishes a Biblically based spirituality is its insistence that embodiment is essential here—something to aim for, not escape.

True enough, Paul often opposes the spirit to the flesh, but for him “flesh” is a code word for our fallenness, and he does not oppose the spirit to the body. In fact, he coined the term “spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15) to speak of the resurrection. (A further note: other NT writers use “flesh” more positively, as in the Gospel of John.)

In spirituality God's initiative remains primary, but not exclusive: we do all kinds of things attempting more faithfully to embody the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ, but we do them because that communion is already at work *drawing* us to do them. And remember, we can't neatly sort out what part of this is our work and what part of this is God's.

Still, there is a human side to this equation that ought to be mentioned. On the human side much of what we mean by “spirituality” involves cultivating a deeper awareness of how our efforts to embody communion are already in communion with God's efforts, and of how that communion might be further enriched.

It's probably self-serving to remind you of this here, but I want you to notice that theology, as I have defined it, remains a crucial component in all spirituality. You can't cultivate that “deeper awareness” without theology—without Barth or Aquinas or Allen, maybe, but not without *some* form of theology, some way of making sense of the Gospel and all other truths that claim us most radically.

Remember what I said at the beginning of our first lecture:

“Theology is at one with the pursuits of peace and justice and with the practices we traditionally call spiritual disciplines. These are all aspects of embodying the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ.

***“It is theology's distinctive and most important task to help us imagine realistically just how such an eccentric and broken communion could already be at work embracing and transfiguring all the mundane, eccentric and broken practices that make up our lives here and now.*”**

“But the influences here are and should be multiple: our pursuits of peace and justice and our cultivation of spiritual disciplines are just as important for theology's health as theology remains for those practices.”

Embodying Communion (in Eccentricity & Brokenness): Ecclesiology & Sacraments

Lecture Notes
Charles W. Allen

Hodgson/King, 237-294

Thistlethwaite, 221-250

McGrath, 461-518

Nullus salus extra ecclesiam: no salvation outside the church (Cyprian of Carthage)

Ubi Christi, ibi ecclesiam: where Christ is, there the church is (Ignatius of Antioch)

Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est: where charity and love are, there God is (9th Century Latin hymn)

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt. 18:20).

Individuality is not incompatible with the Gospel; it is instead an essential component.

But modern individualism *is* incompatible with the Gospel, and there is a truth to Cyprian’s formula that remains vital for today: there is no salvation without communion and thus community.

Ecclesiology describes more what the church is called to be, and not so much what the church actually is. But it is also a declaration that even this broken, eccentric community is beginning to embody the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ.

From 1995:

“As we have seen from previous renditions of the Gospel, God’s unconditional demand, in communion with Jesus Christ, is for us to embody more fully in and for the world what we have already begun to be: a community ordered by the mutual generosity known in the very being of the Triune God.

“The church is the coming into being of such a community claimed by the Gospel, or rather claimed by the communion which the Gospel presents.

“The church is always coming into being. Indeed as an embodiment of God’s communion church ‘happens’ to us just as unexpectedly as any other form of communion with God. And like any other form of God’s communion, while it cannot be programmed, it can and must be cultivated.

“All the church’s activities are to be aimed at the cultivation of God’s communion, and insofar as they do wind up cultivating it they can be considered genuinely sacramental in the same sense that proclamation, baptism and the eucharist can be considered sacramental. All are more or less effective embodiments of God’s communion; none function automatically.

“As a community ordered by mutual generosity, the church, whenever it ‘happens’, is the responsibly confessing community which confirms, illuminates and corrects whatever we have begun to know about God as God’s presence has claimed us in our confessional starting point. This is the church’s ‘teaching office’, in which all are called to participate.”

Topics to consider:

The church as: a responsibly confessing community; the communion of (not very saintly) saints; the people of God; the body of Christ; sacrament of communion; sacrament of liberation.

Marks: unity, holiness, catholicity, apostolicity

Sacraments: outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace; means of grace: they effect what they signify; embodiments of the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ.

Real Presence or real absence?

**Embodying Communion for *All Others*: Christian Faith and Other Religions
Not “Different Paths to the Same Summit”
But “Different Paths to Different Summits’ Communion”**

Lecture Notes

4/14/99

Charles W. Allen

Hodgson/King, 351-380

McGrath, 521-538

“Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your name. Amen.” (BCP, p. 101)

The Gospel and the above prayer both imply that something of ultimate importance has happened in the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ that has not happened anywhere else, and we believe others need to appreciate this just as much as we may need to appreciate their distinctive stories.

So in some sense we are called to evangelize (“share the good news with”) all people, no matter what they may believe.

But we are also called by the Gospel to be open to the “otherness” of other people’s testimonies and traditions, and that’s where things get tricky.

I do not think the Gospel allows us to be “exclusivist,” claiming that the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ is the only legitimate way to speak of what is happening to ultimately heal our brokenness: “we know and they know not.”⁸

An attractive alternative for many has been to downplay the significance of Jesus Christ altogether.

According to John Hick, Jesus Christ is to be regarded as no more than a powerful illustration for Christians of the universal and unconditional love of God (or “the Real” understood as the ultimately salvific reality), the implication being, apparently, that if this illustration doesn’t work for you, then just stick with whatever does seem to work and don’t trouble yourself any more over this one.

There are plenty of equally powerful illustrations to go around. Hick calls this a pluralistic proposal, but I have my doubts.

This would amount to renouncing one of the very *few* convictions that *all* the New Testament writers seem to share, namely, that the proclamation of God’s ever-present love is inseparable from the life and ultimate destiny of the proclaimer, Jesus of Nazareth.

⁸See M. Thomas Thangaraj, *Relating to People of Other Religions* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), pp. 31-41

Furthermore, if we say that the unconditional love of God is the *real* truth behind all the peculiar illustrations of it in the world's religions, we are still doing the very thing this step aimed to avoid--judging other religions in terms of views that are peculiarly ours: Western, monotheistic, Kantian, etc. That's not pluralistic at all

And what could be more anti-Jewish, or more typically patriarchal, than discounting particular stories of particular people as mere illustrations of some ahistorical, universal truth?

So Hick's brand of pluralism won't work.

Another attractive alternative, first proposed by Justin Martyr and popularized in our day by Karl Rahner, is labeled "inclusivism": "we know in full; they know in part" or "we know and know that we know; they know and know not that they know."⁹

This is actually what many Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Jews do with other faiths, including ours, each claims to have THE final truth, but allows others to have important truths as well, though never quite as important.

This is certainly a kinder, gentler way to handle differences, but it still sounds smug and condescending.

It also sounds like a denial of our eccentric and broken relationality.

Both Hick's pluralism and inclusivism are versions of the "different paths to the same summit."

I want to propose a different alternative: different paths to different summits' communion. As the doctrine of the Trinity reminds us, creation and redemption pivot around a center whose unity is multiple in ways we can't pin down. If this doctrine makes any sense (a big "if"), then it makes sense to say that God's redemptive work can pivot just as crucially around more than one event (though of course these other events would all be in some sense "one" just as the Trinity is "one").

Furthermore, the ultimacy of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ carries with it an eschatological proviso: **in certain unforeseeable respects, the "Christ-event" has yet to be completed.** Who knows what else that may involve?

While I can therefore say that communion with Jesus Christ in some sense plays an unsurpassably pivotal role, for God and for all humanity, in realizing God's unconditional love for the world, I cannot dismiss the comparable claim that, say, **Jewish faithfulness to Torah, including a refusal to convert to Christianity, may play just as pivotal a role here.**

Indeed, given Judaism's unique relation to us as our parent tradition, I believe we are called to affirm this claim as complementary to our own: it fulfills our faith every bit as much as ours could ever fulfill Judaism.

The same line of thinking can be extended to involve other traditions, including those that seem non-theistic.

But this is not to render all traditions automatically equal, or equally pivotal. There is still room for disagreement about important matters.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 65-83.

For example, I think that Christians should abandon exclusivism and inclusivism, and so should Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, etc. I can still say that some religious viewpoints are just plain wrong, whether they get called Christian or something else. The proper setting for addressing such issues is an interfaith conversation where everybody gets to make sweeping claims and nobody gets to play a final trump card (except maybe for the final trump card history itself may play for us, but that is not for us to determine).

The church waits and works for a time when its own "Christo-centric" history of reconciliation will be justly and peaceably interwoven with all other comparable histories, in such a way that the unsurpassable import of its own history need not detract from, or be diminished by, whatever comparable import other histories might have for the church.

What I hope is that each of our traditions can interpermeate to the point where I could, say, become more Buddhist and in so doing become even more Christian, and where a Buddhist might become more Christian and in so doing become even more Buddhist, and so on, maybe without the process ever coming to an end.