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'If it is teaching, then teach!' (Romans 12:7): ministry, big issues and grown-up discipleship

Tom Greggs

PROFESSOR TOM GREGGS is the Chair of Historical and Doctrinal Theology, Kings College, University of Aberdeen. His publications include *Barth, Origen, and Universal Salvation*; *Theology against Religion*; and *New Perspectives for Evangelical Theology*.

t.greggs@abdn.ac.uk
Aberdeen, UK

After addressing the teaching and learning context in which contemporary theology exists, this article seeks to address contemporary Methodism and Methodist theology. Drawing on Scripture and theologians, it is argued that the Church is a creation of the Holy Spirit, and knows itself as such not only as it is created intensely so by an event of the Spirit of God, but also that the purpose of this intensive indwelling work of the Holy Spirit is to push the Church beyond its boundaries and orientate it onto the world. In light of this, seven motifs are identified for a theology which seeks to serve the Church.

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This following journal article is a facsimile of a lecture which was given as the 2014 Presbyteral Session of the British Methodist Conference. It stands largely unchanged from its first delivery in the hope that the texture and tone of the lecture's content might also be retained, and it was given at the request of the out-going President, the Revd Ruth Gee, that the author speak on issues relating to church, theology and public life.

Introduction

If I am honest, and at the risk of losing a great deal of you in the opening section of this paper, as a theologian in the twenty-first century, in terms of most of the conversations I have (especially in relation to people from the Church and the vocation I feel called to), I sometimes feel a little bit akin to one of the violin players who chose to play on while the *Titanic* sank. We live in an age in which the Church (and particularly perhaps our own and other Nonconformist traditions) finds itself sidelined. We do not enjoy the status we once had. Churches are closing. Our large preaching houses are emptying. Focus is often on the management of decline. Cultures have shifted towards relativism and pluralism. Book shops now stock more books on New Age medicine than Bibles.

There are potentially two implications of this in terms of theology. The first is that theology (public or otherwise) may well seem to be a luxury that we cannot afford in The Methodist Church in Britain at this moment of ecclesial austerity: priorities have to be ordered elsewhere. The second is that even if we do afford ourselves time to focus on theology, it is very easy for us in the context in which we live (a context which is complexly secular and pluralist) to lose confidence in the message we are called to proclaim; it is easy to feel we cannot have confidence in the gospel. Either way, the circumstance for us can feel somewhat desperate, and the context in which we might think of public theology as existing is one in which we can feel as though there is no public interested and, even if there were, we would be unsure about what it is we should say to them.

Remembering the context in which we worship, live and speak is, however, important. It is important for us in terms of the priorities we set ourselves; in terms of differentiating between that which is central and that which is peripheral to our purpose. But it is in this context that the words of St Paul in the title of this paper need to resound loud and clear: if our calling is to teach,

then let us teach. There is, it seems to me, no theology which is not public theology: there is no theology without a public, without the context of teaching and learning. Doctrine after all comes from the Latin *doceo*, meaning 'I teach'; and disciple from the Latin *discere,* meaning 'to learn'. To be a disciple is to be a learner; just as to engage in doctrine, in theology, is to engage with teaching. Theology is not about playing some intellectual chess game in our heads, nor is it an exercise between some small esoteric gnostic group; theology is, instead, about teaching the faith publicly in order to foster grown-up disciples (grown-up learners) who live in a context of pressing big questions. We are at a moment when we need to learn again to put our fiddles down and to speak calmly and meaningfully, speaking the way to go so that others may learn: rather than to play our fiddles while the *Titanic* sinks, we are to instruct people calmly into the lifeboats and aid people in a time of difficulty.

The Church exists only for the world: it is orientated outwards

It is of vital importance that we realise that, as the Church, we do not exist for ourselves. Our life is not to be focused or ordered primarily inwardly upon our own polity and order. It is to be focused outwards to the world. Any church which seeks to be the true Church by ordering itself internally as such is sure to fail to become the true Church: the true Church exists for the world. This means we are to have a voice not only ordered to ourselves but to those many for whom Jesus Christ lived, died and was raised, who as yet do not know the good news.

Martin Luther (drawing upon Augustine) speaks of sin as the *cor incurvatum in se* (the heart turned in upon itself). In the Church, we not only turn our individual hearts towards one another as part of salvation; but we also turn our corporate heart *as the Church* outwards towards the world. Our purpose is not for ourselves and our self-preservation: our purpose is for the world. Let me explain what I mean.

In Acts 1:12 we get what seems to be the beginnings of the Church. A little bit like the way in which each year the superintendent minister reads out the list of preachers at the Preachers' Meeting, we get something similar with the list of the disciples in v. 13. We then get a description of worship (v.14). We have count of membership in v. 15 (obviously to work out what the circuit assessment would be!). Then a sermon and readings led by Peter is offered – a

service. After that, there is even a church council meeting, with an election of officers (vv. 23–26), and Matthias taking the new position.

The description of what is going on in Acts 1 looks to me as though what we are dealing with is a church. However, and this is crucial, it is not; what we get in Acts 1 has only a *semblance* of the Church. The Church begins in chapter 2:

> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:1–4[1])

The Church begins at Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit. The foundational condition of the Church is not ecclesial propriety or having officers appropriately in place. The foundational condition of the Church is simply the presence of the Holy Spirit who is present within the variety and plurality of the community in all its variety and diversity.

We live in an age today in which we are rightly nervous about the lack of the impact of the Church on a broader society, which is at once marked by secularism and pluralism. It is perhaps right that as people we have asked the question that Dietrich Bonhoeffer poses to his own (somewhat different) situation of de-christianisation: 'What does a church, a congregation, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life, mean in a religionless world?',[2] or – we might say – a complexly religious and secular world.

However, in seeking to answer this question, as a church we have very often descended, in the words of the American theologian Michael Jinkins, into 'the hyperactivity of panic. This manifests itself in clutching for any and every programmatic solution and structural reorganization in the desperate hope that survival is just another project or organizational chart away.'[3] The result has been that we have sought to think about the Church in resolutely inward-facing, self-preserving and non-theological terms; and this runs deep. We are concerned very often to ape the church of Acts 1, not attend to the condition of the existence of the church in Acts 2 – the condition of the presence of the Spirit. We have become obsessed with questions of *how* to be church, I fear, sometimes at the expense of thinking about the question of *what* the Church actually is.

I want to propose to you today that the Church is simply and singularly a dynamic community of the Holy Spirit of God, and that we need to attend to the Spirit's sovereignty over the Church if we are to have any hope of being a church which is meaningful to the world, because it is the Holy Spirit who makes God present in the contingent situations, in the contexts of big questions, in which we find ourselves. Calvin writes that there is no reason 'to pretend … that God is so bound to persons and places, and attached to external observances, that he has to remain among those who have only the title and appearance of a church [Rom 9:6].'[4] If, as I suggest, that is true of the players in Acts 1, then it is no less true for us today – whatever those external observances might be (whether contemporary or traditional, low or high church). It is the Holy Spirit of God alone who gives life to the Church. While the Church is formed into the Body of Christ, it is the Holy Spirit who does this. The order here is important. We pray 'Come Holy Spirit' in order that we may say 'Jesus is Lord'; we pray 'Come Holy Spirit' because the Spirit is the one who makes present the reality of Christ in the multiplicity, diversity and plurality of the communities which form the universal Body of Christ. The Spirit is the one who guides the Church, who helps the Church to know and understand its purpose in the world, to help us to receive the gospel in the context in which we live. The Spirit is the one who guides us to speak theologically in all our changing publics.

How we are a true Church rather than something with the semblance of a church is related to the presence of the Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ and who makes the Word known to us in the present and in all of our messiness and contingency. Not having the semblance of a church is *not* under any circumstances about one form of church practice or liturgy or worship trumping another. The issue at stake is, instead, one which involves a recognition simply that the Church is made the Church by an act and event of God the Holy Spirit; and the Church is made simply, completely and fully to serve the world of which it is a part. To find the concrete condition of the Church in the world, we have to ask the following question: does the Church display the Spirit's fruits?

None of this is to say that the Holy Spirit is only confined to the Church. As I've said on numerous occasions before: while the Holy Spirit is the *sine qua non* of the Church, the Church is not the *sine qua non* of the Holy Spirit. The condition for the existence of the Church is the presence of the Spirit; but the condition for the presence of the Spirit (who blows wherever God wills) is not the Church.

But what does this mean in terms of our speech to the world, our public theology?

The Holy Spirit presses us to move towards the world: outside of ourselves and beyond our boundaries

Lots of the imagery surrounding the Holy Spirit in Scripture is imagery that we might think of as being 'intense'. In Acts, we have a picture of deep intensity. Think about the language that is used to describe the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost:

> And suddenly from *heaven* there came a sound like the *rush of a violent wind*, and it *filled* the entire house where they were sitting. Divided *tongues, as of fire*, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were *filled* with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.
>
> Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered… (Acts 2:2–6)

This is maximal metaphorical language here: violent winds, heaven, filling, tongues of fire. And this is only what the event is *like*! Luke struggles to find the words that do justice to this description of the event. The imagery here is thick, deep, wildly intense.

Worship and holiness are in many ways like that. We find ourselves wonderfully lost in God. Think of the way in which congregations sing in our Methodist tradition – voices and tongues crying out in praise of God, 'cathedrals of sound' calling for a thousand tongues to sing our Great Redeemer's praise. There is an intensity about what we do. Feeling God's presence deep within is a fundamental part of this – what John Wesley called having our hearts 'strangely warmed'. The palpable presence of the Spirit in this worship brings with it a degree of assurance: the knowledge of the presence of God who, although not seen, feels as real to us by the power of the Spirit as the presence of a mighty wind blowing through us.

One of the dangers of this intensity is that it can easily transform itself into interiority. Worship can become about *my* getting that particular feeling; what *I* get out of it. Even in its best forms, all too easily (and of this I am more than culpable) worship can become about *my* relationship with God. We often respond to this by pointing out the need for community, for ecclesiality. Certainly the story of Pentecost is not an occurrence that happens to only one person. Luke tells us (Acts 2:1): 'When the day of Pentecost had come, *they* were *all together* in one place.' A focus on the Church is certainly better than a focus on the self. However, I wonder whether that really goes far enough. While lots of worship and devotion in our tradition is about personal relationship with God, I think we do quite a good job of building community internally. We celebrate communion; we emphasise small groups; and (let's be frank) we're friendly enough; Methodists are nice folk – and we do a good line in puddings. My fear is rather that our communities can become about collective egos rather than individual ones: we can move too easily from thinking about 'me' to think about 'people like me', with whom I like to be. We can refocus our concern on our church, preserving or building *it* up, making sure *it* doesn't fall apart on our watch.

There is nothing wrong in that in and of itself. But I want to ask this: what is the purpose of that intensity? Certainly, worship of God; yes. That comes before all else. But we are not in heaven yet, and we should be patient with the world which God has created and patiently sustains as the cosmos awaits redemption. Instead, I want to say that the purpose of this intensity is for the extensity of the world: it is for the public. This intensity is one that leads, nay throws, us outwards: it leads us to the world, to our publics. The disciples move from being gathered in their upper room (selecting their officers, being orientated on one another, and on God), to in the event of Pentecost being orientated on God and the world.

The universality of that extensity is emphatically repeated in Acts 2 (vv. 5–11):

> Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to

> Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.'

The orientation outwards onto the world and for the world is an extensity which is the purpose and simultaneous effect of the coming intensity of the Holy Spirit.

Should we be remotely surprised by this, however? Is that not God's way throughout the Bible? God appears in a burning bush and Moses takes off his shoes because he is on holy ground and speaks with God. And Moses experiences that deep intensity of God not so that he can think 'Oh, that was a nice thing to happen?' or 'Aren't I special?' or 'Haven't I got worship right?'; but so that he rescue a people from slavery, and lead them to freedom. As Gregory of Nyssa reminds us in his *Life of Moses*, the result of the intensity of God's presence on Sinai (the thunder claps, the sound of the *shofar*, the cloud) in Exodus 19 is the giving of the Law, is relations with people and the world. Deep intensity with God leads us out to the world. In fact the Ten Commandments themselves even work that way – a focus on God followed by a focus on others. I could go on: Isaiah 6, or the Greatest Commandment. An orientation towards God leads us to an orientation towards the other; the two belong together. The intense coming of God's Spirit leads us to the extensity of the world around us. The Spirit, who leads us into deep worship and love of God, leads us simultaneously outwards to the world.

Karl Barth, to my mind the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, once wrote this:

> The work of the Holy Spirit in the gathering and upbuilding of the community … cannot merely lead to the blind alley of a new qualification, enhancement, deepening and enrichment of this being of the community as such. Wonderful and glorious as this is, *it is not an end in itself even in what it includes for its individual members*. The enlightening power of the Holy Spirit draws and impels and presses beyond its being as such, beyond all the reception and experience of its members, beyond all that is promised to them personally. And only as it follows this drawing and impelling is it the real community of Jesus Christ.[5]

The Spirit who leads us ever deeper into God, whose Spirit testifies to our spirit, leads us at once ever deeper into the world, for the world. To be theological, to engage with God, is simultaneously to be led out towards the public, towards the world. These two cannot be prised apart. The Spirit is, after all, God's coming to the world in the time between the times. A church with a singularly inwards concern for itself, even if a good community of praise and of love of God, with Scripture and preaching as central, can never be the church of Pentecost; it will only ever be the church of Acts 1. My other great theological hero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, put it thus:

> The space of the church does not, therefore, exist just for itself, but its existence is already always something that reaches far beyond it. This is because it is not the space of a cult that would have to fight for its own existence in the world. Rather, the space of the church is the place where witness is given to the foundation of all reality in Jesus Christ … The space of the church is not there in order to fight with the world for a piece of territory, but precisely to testify to the world that it is still the world, namely the world that is loved and reconciled by God.[6]

The Church receives the Spirit of God in deep and intense ways to enable it to exist for the world in all its extensity, plurality and diversity – to exist for its public. It is, after all, the nature of the Spirit to be freely and extensively present in the world; and the Church is a place where that extensive presence intensely dwells – not for the Church's own sake but for the world. The intensity is like that of a light on a lampstand, which burns brightly not for its own sake but for the sake of the room it lights up; and the more intensely and brighter it burns, the more the light cannot but fill the room. It is impossible to have an intense light without its extensive effects: the two belong together.

What might this theology look like?

If all of this is true, what does this mean for the theology that the Church engages in? What should this theology look like?

Here, I want to identify seven motifs, seven principles if you like, for the Church to observe in relation to its theology, which cannot be anything but public, since it is engaged in by the Church and since the Church exists only for the world.

1. Theology is an activity of love and praise of God

For as much as theology has a practical end point, and is located in the Church, it is also a way in which as human beings we engage in the adoration of God. When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus said: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your *mind*' (Lk 10:27 and parallels). The enterprise of theology, before it terminates in practical and public *outputs* in and from the Church, is primarily a discipline of discipleship which comprises part of the Church's activity of loving God with its mind. Before its order upon the public, theology must order itself towards God. This is not to say that theology is a discipline with no practical end point, but it is to say that the proper and immediate context for theology is that of love and praise of God: not playing chess with a philosophical concept or reducing theology to its singularly contextual or practical purposes, but rather understanding theological thinking as existing ultimately not for its own or the community's or the public's sake, but *also* and ultimately for the sake of the adoration of God. To love God with our minds does not mean, however, that we somehow denigrate the affections. It is rather about the reality that if you love a person, you wish to continue to get to know them: you do not just stop at the first date, if you like. We need to instil the significance of intellectual engagements with the faith deep within our ministers and our people: that this is a part of their spirituality; it is a way that they love with their minds. Continued serious theological engagement is in some sense a part of the path of sanctification. The old class system of Methodism demonstrated that.

I learned recently that C. K. Barrett, the great Methodist scholar, used to teach miners New Testament Greek, as they wished to read the New Testament in its original in their lunch breaks down the mine. That is what it means to love God with our mind, and to learn to love God more: the true and primary context of theology is discipleship and love and adoration. This is not some intellectually snobby comment: it is a comment about seeking to know more of God in order to love God in every way possible (including with our minds).

The practical offshoot of this ultimate purpose of theology is, however, that we cannot allow the Church to settle for Sunday school understandings of the Lord (or allow our preachers to get away with children's addresses for sermons). Being reminded that the primary location of theological discourse is love of God, we should also be reminded that we need *continually* to love God *in ever deeper* ways with our minds. We need grown-up discipleship. Paul talks about the differences between childish desires and adult ones. We must do all we can

to prevent congregations being fed with spiritual milk; and we must do all we can to see progression, in Pauline terms, from milk to meat.

Furthermore, there is a very contextual element to this. We now live in a society which is better educated by and large than at any time previously: 50 per cent of the population now goes to university; literacy levels are high; there is compulsory education up to the age of 18 in England and Wales. However, speaking from my own experience, if I were to compare the level of intellectual demands placed on me most Sundays to that Wesley placed on miners and field labourers, we would all, I think, be shocked. Wesley, however, delivered his sermons to vast numbers of illiterate people: the reading rooms used to educate people are evidence of that, as is the original Sunday school movement. Yet, Wesley had faith in his congregation (and faith in the Spirit of God) not to have to dumb down his message to a lowest common denominator, and he saw salvation as total salvation, such that it was also a salvation of the intellect. We need, in the current age of intellectual assault on Christianity, to show that we love God with our minds, and to use our critical and intellectual faculties to reflect on the nature of God and God's ways with the world.

2. Theology is an activity by which we know God

At the start of his *Confessions*, Augustine presents us with a problem. He says that he desires to search after God, but (reflecting on his life as an unbeliever) does not know who it is that he is searching for without already knowing God. (This leads Augustine into long discourses on the nature of memory, but we need not go into that.) Augustine presents us with a very real problem, which is a very real problem for this age. And this problem is this: it is not remotely clear and settled what or who God is for most people. 'God' is a difficult word: it is a common noun functioning like a proper noun. We know it's a common noun (like 'fluff' or 'jam') by virtue of the fact that it is translated: *God*, *theos*, *Gott*, *Deiu*, *Deus*, etc. But it is used like a proper noun (like 'Sheila' or 'Bob'). What this means is that 'God' can mean all kinds of different things to all kinds of different people. And even within the Church, we can all be unintentionally idolatrous.

In Exodus 3, Moses meets God in a burning bush, and Moses asks an eminently sensible question: what's your name (this is a theme also picked up in Exodus 6)? Effectively, it seems to me, he is asking: 'Well, which god are you?' God answers by pointing Moses to a particular history with a particular people: 'I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' (and we would all want to say 'and Sarah, Rebekkah, Leah and Rachel as well'!). Moses needed to know which god

he was dealing with. He needed to know what the referent of the word 'God' was. This is an issue that we need to address today. In the Church, we are called to tell people about God: about what God is like, and who God is. People are unhelpfully idolatrous all the time, and this causes very concrete pastoral problems and issues, as people confuse God with all kinds of deities (which are ungracious, unloving, distant, deistic, and so on…), leading them to fear. Many pastoral situations also often arise from people getting the referent wrong in terms of theological description: the image of a wrathful God; or an extrinsic God (as is Dawkins' description); or a God who is completely other and uninterested in the world. We need to say to the world, tell us all about the God you do not believe in, because we do not believe in that God either. And let us talk confidently and publically about the God of grace and of mercy and of salvation. Thinking theologically helps us to understand who God is, and what God is like; and helps us to tell people about that God. At a time when many people do not believe in God, and when many of those who do have unhelpful images of the nature of God, this is pressing and a public issue.

3. Theology is an activity by which we know that God is eternally ahead of us

Getting the referent right (knowing which god) is not only about the narrative so far, or history up to this point. Theology is not primarily an historical discipline. The reason for this is that when Moses asks God's name, God answers in this enigmatic way: 'I am who I am.' Except, that is not really what the Hebrew means. Our translations feel some of the effects of the Septuagint's *egō eimi ho ōn* (I am the being, or something like that) which is rendered in the Latin *ego sum qui sum* (I am who I am). The Hebrew is more dynamic than that, however – more historical, more active. The Hebrew, *eyeher asher eyeher*, is difficult to translate, but it means something like 'I will be who I will be'; 'I will cause to be what I cause to be'; as well as 'I am who I am'; and any combination, perhaps, thereof. What is key to take from this is that there is a future and a causative element to the nature of God; indeed, we see that in the history which is about to take place, as God does something monumental, history-shaping and new in the book of Exodus. And we also see it in the image of God as a pillar of cloud or of fire: God is the God who is always ahead of us, leading us, in front of us.

Taking theology seriously should remind us of this, and prevent us from being so concrete in our idea of God that we make an idol of our own current or historical imaginings. So often, we can all behave as if we needed to drag God into the future; that everything would be fine if we were only to update

ourselves and be contemporary. Or else we reify God in terms of some past image of God (whether medieval and indebted to Aquinas, or modern and indebted to Schleiermacher). However, God is not some past museum piece that requires distant hands-off observation, or else sprucing up, or making contemporary. God is forever ahead of us. This future/causative name of God is something God has 'forever throughout all generations'. This is the image that Gregory of Nyssa gives us in his description of the *eschaton* (the end either individually or at the return of Christ): Nyssa offers us the idea of *epektesis* as one of forever journeying deeper into the God who in his infinity is always beyond us and ahead of us.

However, there is something very practical to this as well for the contemporary setting. God is ahead of the Church leading us, and we should not therefore confuse the conservative position with the true position. If the Church had presumed God were only the Church's understanding of God up to this point, then imagine what terrible things we would be doing still. Three hundred and fifty years ago we were dunking witches and burning heretics; in the last century some traditions made women be churched after childbirth; and it is only in our lifetimes that women have been able to be ordained in some Churches, and in some traditions they still are not able to fulfil that vocation. These things may well seem monstrous to most of us now, and we may be tempted to think that things are better now. But what issues will people look back in 350 years' time at in relation to what we do, and think what monstrous and awful people? God is not about conserving; God's business is transforming and making new. And that is something God will do for all eternity. Theology should guard us against mindless conservation and repetition.

4. Theology is an activity which is meaningful only in the life of the Church

Theology's subject and context is the Church, but it asks questions that otherwise might not be asked within and by the Church. Primarily theology asks questions about the nature of the Church, the 'what the Church is' questions which should precede 'the how the Church is done' question. The 'what' question might come in all kinds of forms – nature of God, way of reading Scripture, mechanisms of salvation – but will ultimately be an attempt at expressing what the Church believes, or should believe, or might believe. In the contemporary setting, this is a really important issue because at times we have undertaken a determinedly functionalist understanding of the life of the Church.

It is necessary to pause here a moment to say a few things about this.

(a) I am terribly anxious about the preoccupation that we have at the moment to engage in business model approaches to the life of the Church and to its ministry. Now, in a supportive role they are good and well and proper, but the Church is not a business. It is necessary to repeat this: the Church is not a business. We may well need wise stewardship. But the Church is the Body of Christ, as it is made such by the Holy Spirit who enables the Church to participate in, encounter and be transformed by the resurrected Jesus. The flourishing of a church does not come by strategy (though we may need to be strategic); it comes by the activity of the Spirit forming us into the wounded but resurrected Body of Christ. Priority of understanding here is important: we need to reflect on what the Church is before we can reflect on how we do it. So often in ecclesiology, we concern ourselves with the church of Acts 1; we need to concern ourselves with the church of Acts 2 (see above). This leads, secondly, to the following point.

(b) The focus of the Church cannot be its survival. This is a focus on the self, and it is an instrumentalisation of the world. The world does not exist for the sake of the Church; the Church exists for the sake of the world. This order is absolutely key for those in ministry – again in terms of priority and vocation. William Temple is reputed to have said, 'The Church is the only cooperative organisation which exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.'[7]

Theology needs to help the Church move from its preoccupation with form to a preoccupation with its nature.

5. Theology is an activity by which we are led into all truth

All of this approach so far has been quite individualised or ecclesial in some sense, despite what I said in the first part of this lecture. However, theology is a discipline which concerns God and God's ways with the world, and there is nothing that cannot be understood in relation to God's ways with the world. Thomas Aquinas speaks of theology as a science whose subject is God and all things in relation to God. Scripture itself talks about all kinds of things (from how we dress to what we should do with our politics). The people who comprise the Church have all kinds of experiences and come from all kinds of backgrounds in which they do not cease to be Christian but in which they function as Christians. Theology is not, therefore, some narrow disciplinary engagement in small and technical questions; there is, instead, a sense in which there is nothing that is not theological data.

In John 16, Jesus says that the Spirit will lead us into all truth. The idea of truth here is not some abstract game of epistemology; the idea of truth is rather more concretely related to the concept of reality. The reality of the world in all of its complexity is God's; and the Christian theologian is to reflect on that very real world and the very real God who is working within it – who created, sustains and will redeem it. That means that theology has as its conjoined-twin discipline, the discipline of ethics, and that the Church is to think about its relation to the rest of creation in this way. Let us think again for a moment about the foundation of the Church at Pentecost. The immediate effects of the coming of the Holy Spirit and of the foundation of the Church are political and economic. Although we are told that miraculous signs accompanied the Church at the end of Acts 2, twice the amount of space is given over to something even more amazing – that everyone held things in common. And there is a sense as well in which we might think that the very recording of the *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues) is a description of a new political reality in which difference is not undermined by and does not lead to a breakdown of community or a strain in communication (speaking and listening).

Theology is training in how to read all of creation as the creation of God.

6. Theology is the way we reflect on last Sunday's sermon to make next Sunday's better

There is a very practical and real concern that theology should have: we can never exhaust the knowledge of God, and we are on a never-ending journey of discovery. The idea that we have arrived, and that we do not need to progress, is a long way from the idea of Christian discipleship. Theology has a critical task, as Barth tells us, in terms of the Church's self-examination of its proclamation. It seems to me that clergy need to read more theology in order to make their sermons better; and academic theologians need to write more theology that clergy would read!

Although certainly there is much to be said for the simplicity of faith, that is not where things end, as I've said already. Jesus tells us to have deep roots, or else to build on a rock. Paul tells us to mature in faith; the Psalms speak of 'deep calling unto deep' (Ps 42:7). We need a ministry that produces grown-up disciples in a grown-up world of big questions. I hope that what we are producing, all of us as those who teach and who preach, are disciples who are lifelong learners of the faith. And there is a need for us to tie theology much more overtly to the activity of preaching.

I am firmly of the opinion that theological reflection is the highest-order discipline that we have; the apex of theological education. And it is obviously not just sermons that we reflect on; sermon here is shorthand simply to make my point. But the effort and energy that go into the main weekly services need to be recognised, and emphasised; and the relation of these to the reading of theology (not just commentary) is key. The centrality of a study day for us all who preach is also crucial.

7. Theology deals with ultimate questions in light of God

Who are we? What happens when we die? Where do we come from? Why do bad things happen to good people? Who is God? Does God love me?

These are the big questions which people I meet are desperately asking. We need only to go into a general book shop and look at the Spirituality and Religion section in order to see how desperate people are for meaning and answers. I do not know what the answers to all the questions people ask are completely. But I want to be able to have a go at struggling with people with them; I want to pose them to myself; and I want them to be the basis of the sorts of questions we address in pastoral settings and in preaching. I think these are questions that we need to be asking ourselves to engage with. In some sense, I care less about how we answer them than I do that we wrestle publically with them. That is what public theology is all about.

I have always thought that the best image of preaching and theological reflection is the image of Jacob wrestling with God. Charles Wesley put this nicely in his hymn 'Come, O thou traveller unknown' with the refrain, 'Wrestling I will not let thee go,/ Till I thy name and nature know.' The task is for us to wrestle in public with God before other people. This is not about thinking that we can somehow pin God down with the answers we have already come to, but rather about wrestling with God to find truth. We cannot give up on the big questions, and we must continue throughout our lives, throughout our ministry, to wrestle with them. To do public theology involves love of God and love of the world; it involves wrestling with the deep things of God in public; it means preaching this wrestling, living with it.

Conclusion

However tempted we may be as a church in a context which is complexly religious and secular in the UK, and in which the Methodist tradition seems

particularly to be in decline, to see theology as an unnecessary ecclesial luxury; however tempted we may be to lose confidence in the proclamation of the gospel and our own capacity to relate it to our context; however tempted we may be to attend to the polity and form of the Church at the expense of its God-created life and nature (the church of Acts 1 and not the church of Acts 2), let us never as a church forget the absolutely central role of theology to our ministry, discipleship and public life. Theology is an act in which we love God and through loving God are enabled to love those others around us more. We should not arrive at theological quandaries and questions with formulae in place or with a sense that the rich wisdom of the past might not offer guidance and hope in the present. We are called to teach the gospel of Christ, and whatever answers we feel in our theological wrestling we may come to, if we are called to teach, then let us teach.

Notes

1. Quotations from the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version (Anglicized Edition).
2. Bonhoeffer 2010, p. 364.
3. Jinkins 1999, p. 9.
4. Calvin [1559] 1960, 4.2.3, p. 1044. These discussions concern Roman Catholicism polemically. However, outside of that polemic, the dogmatic content remains helpful and can usefully be redirected back to the Protestant Church as itself an *ecclesia semper reformanda*.
5. Barth 2004, § 72, p. 764.
6. Bonhoeffer 2005, p. 63.
7. Obviously, much more can and needs to be said about the ontology, function and instrumentality of the Church. The reader is directed to my forthcoming work on ecclesiology (a three-volume account of the Church from a Protestant perspective). The first volume is due to be completed in 18 months (in 2017) and to be published by Baker.

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