WE DO THEOLOGY BECAUSE WE ARE BAPTISED

Installation Address by
THE REV. DR. ANDREW PURVES
Jean and Nancy Davis Professor of Historical Theology
Enclosed is a complimentary copy of the installation address of the Rev. Dr. Andrew Purves, the first occupant of the Jean and Nancy Davis Chair of Historical Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. It has been printed for distribution to a wider audience because of its emphasis on the relation of theology to the church. Professor Purves asserts, “Theology is an expression of our baptismal identity in and of our belonging to God,…a work not just of the theologian but of the church as an historical theological community.” He continues by expounding on the implications of this affirmation for the faith, worship, and ministry of the church. We hope that you will find his address helpful as you pursue your Christian walk.
Mr. Chairman and members of the Board of Directors, Mr. President, Mr. Dean and faculty colleagues, members of the Seminary administration, students and guests, and members of my family, thank you for being here. And less formally, thank you Jack Isherwood and Bill Carl and the Board for installing me as the first Jean and Nancy Davis Professor of Historical Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

This is now the fifth appointment I have had in my 31 years on this faculty. I began as the assistant professor of pastoral theology and spirituality. In due course I became the associate professor of pastoral theology, being deemed by all that I was no longer spiritual, as that word was dropped from my title. I ascended to the Hugh Thomson Kerr Chair of Pastoral Theology, on which I rested for many years. Soon after Bill Carl’s arrival to be President he made an honest man of me and I was appointed to a new position as professor of Reformed theology, but no chair alas. Now in my dotage I get to sit down again on this new chair. It is amazing: I never imagined for a moment that I was learned enough such that it would take five academic appointments to encompass my abilities. All humor aside, as I look back over the sweep of my years here I am filled with gratitude, and the sense of the Lord’s blessing accompanies me beyond all that I might have expected.

The chapel here at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary has recently been reformed. The old pews, linearly bolted to a slate floor in a series of rigid rows, which allowed napes to be piously considered, were unbolted and disposed of. The immovable pulpit was moved (a crane was seen one day!), consigned to some other use. Fresh paint, with color, was applied. And new, expressly designed chairs, font, table, and pulpit were moved into (movable) place. Now, students, administrators, and faculty who gather to worship must enter this beautiful, flexible space negotiating the baptismal font which is placed, awkwardly but with intent, right in the middle of the
entrance to the chapel. To worship we must enter through baptism. This is a wonderful metaphor for a theological seminary.

We do theology because we are baptized; as such, theology is a work of the communion of saints. Theology is a work of faith in which we try to understand the God who in Jesus Christ has claimed us and bound us to himself, and thereby made us the church. Theology is an expression of our baptismal identity in and of our belonging to God, and as such is a work not just of the theologian but of the church as an historical theological community. Theology does not seek to know about God in an abstract, speculative manner (how could the living God be known in such a manner in any case), but seeks to know God more fully as the God who in and as Jesus Christ has joined us to himself and made us the community of the baptized, the community bound to Jesus Christ.

The relation between baptism and theology is reciprocal in this way. Baptism leads to theology in order to understand as faithfully as we can who it is in whom we live, and move and have our being (Acts 17:28); while theology is more or less pointless without baptism, a mere chasing after God-thoughts fitfully flitting around in our brains (Calvin). Theology reminds us that baptism is not an empty ritual devoid of content. One goal of baptism surely is living in Christ Jesus, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as we were taught (Col 2: 6-7). In which case, one goal of theology is pietas. Baptism reminds us that theology is a holy work of the people of God, part of the vowed life of disciplined people whose lives are transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:2). Recently Julie Canlis has pointedly summed up this perspective: we attempt to do theology in terms of “the belief that we are neither isolated Christians nor objective scientists, but rather within a church and stream of tradition.” We are after what John Webster once called “theological theology,” by which he intended theology that dares to think God, relationally and experientially, as it were, rather than think about God, as at some kind of distance, remotely and neutrally.

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As baptism is a public act of the church, likewise theology is a public work of the church, for the glory of God, one hopes, but also for the sake of the church, for testing proclamation and teaching, for guiding ministry, and for nurturing and maturing intelligent and well informed faith and life. In this sense, theology is for the sake of the baptized, with particular concern for the sanctification of mind leading to well-instructed faith, well-informed worship, and well-guided ministry. Theology has little obvious purpose otherwise. However, far too often it seems this bond between theology and baptism as they intersect in and for the faith, worship and ministry of the church is much unloosed. Theology can be arcane, obscure, and downright technical, a discipline for experts with terminal degrees, of little apparent contribution to make to the situational demands of congregational and personal life. Unmoored from baptism, theology easily becomes lord over its own life, a discipline of the academic guild rather than the church.

Now there is nothing wrong with expertise when it is put to the right use, and when it is offered with humility in view of the enormity of its task, mindful always of its subject of study. Alas, however, all too often we have not a lot of theological knowledge in the community of the baptized. The sophistication of godly and faith-building theological discourse may be most notable in its relative absence in the weekly round of Christian congregational routine. (In a darker mood one might suspect that this is the case on both sides of the pulpit!) And the fault does not only lie at the door of theology and theologians. Theology in service to the church should be accessible, intended for all, but those for whom it is intended must also make the effort to be educated.

Clearly, when the connections between theology and the community of the baptized become unloosed both suffer. Theology without baptism has lost its anchor and its purpose, becoming a discipline listlessly wandering the corridors of the academy whimpering for a seat at the table. Baptism without theology never matures into Christians having the mind of Christ. The meager fruit can be cliché-ridden piety or a drift toward narcissistic experience-centered authoritarianism. Both a theology which is no longer accountable to baptism and an unthinking faith, surely, are offensive to the Gospel. If these are caricatures, perhaps enough of truth abides to make a valid point.
Theology Can be Learned

A discipled life takes discipline. Both living the life of a thoughtful Christian and doing theology can be hard work. They involve skill sets that must be learned, just as we need education to do physics or plant a garden or raise children. Gathering information and the thoughtful interpretation of experience interact in all knowing. Further, knowledge draws upon received wisdom. A theologian works in gratitude for a tradition handed down, not to be followed uncritically of course, but received with respect and delight. And this is done, surely, we insist, within communities of discourse that at some point express faith through common worship and shared ministry. Thus the relation between baptism and theology is caught up in a multilayered series of connections and responsibilities. If baptism is the empirical point of entrance to the Christian life, theology is part of God’s provision for the purpose of growth and maturity in that life, and for the building up of the church. The goal of both baptism and theology is Christian identity and formation so that the Christian lives and thinks “in Christ.”

The late Scottish theologian Hugh Ross Mackintosh once noted that “theology is simply a persistent and systematic attempt to clarify the convictions by which Christians live.” In which case, we cannot do theology in neutral terms. This is borne out when we place a central Christian conviction before us for consideration: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19). We cannot know God without being reconciled to God, for there is no God to know except the God who has come among us savingly as the man Jesus. The logos tou theou (2 Cor 2.17), the word of God, cannot in Christian terms be other than the logos tou staurou (1 Cor 1.18), the message about the cross. Knowledge of a non-saving God is nonsense. As J. Moltmann rightly notes, “It is he, the crucified Jesus himself, who is the driving force, the joy and the suffering of all theology which is Christian.” Our task as theologians is to try to make faithful witness to this God who encounters us in,

through, and as the man Jesus Christ, as he is attested by scripture, and as we are led by the Holy Spirit as together the Body of Christ to share in the communion of love between the Father and the Son. The subject matter is God whom we know in Jesus Christ to be savior and Lord. The theologian tries to make some sense of this in spite of the fact that God is not reducible to our sentences. Our task in theology, then, as T. F. Torrance notes (yes, you knew I would cite him eventually!), is to yield the obedience of our minds to what is given, which is God’s self-revelation in its objective reality, Jesus Christ. Our approach, in short, “can only be from the standpoint of sinners whose sins have been forgiven, and for whom Christ is the Son of the living God become flesh in order to reconcile the world to God.” Theology is a confessional discipline, obedient to and humble before the mystery of Christ (Col 2: 25-27 and Eph 3:4, for example, and elsewhere), seeking to learn what is to be known of God from that mystery as he declares himself to us.

This is exactly what we find in a famous sentence from Peter Melanchthon, at the beginning of his Loci Communes, 1521: Hoc est Christum cognoscere, beneficia eius cognoscere – This is to know Christ, to know his benefits. We know Jesus Christ insofar as we know him to be Lord over us, to be savior for us, and as such know him as God who encounters us. To cite Torrance again: “the knowledge of Christ arises in the knowledge of his salvation. How we know Christ and what we know of him belong inseparably together.” What is important here, and what was central for Melanchthon, is that it is not because Christ brings us benefits that he is Lord for us, but that he reveals God to us, and as such we know ourselves to be sheltered and healed in him.

The danger in our task is that in seeking to bring this God known through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit to faithful expression we

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6 Thomas F. Torrance, Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), 1, slightly adapted.
7 Torrance, Incarnation, 11.
9 Torrance, Incarnation, 33.
strip God of his glory. After all, we are masters of divinity and doctors of philosophy. How easy it is to forget that here we speak of holy things, we who are not holy. How easy it is to forget that there is no humanly rational explanation for incarnation and atonement, or for the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, or for knowledge of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Rather, in theological knowledge, in order to know God in a Godly manner, our minds must undergo a profound metanoia, literally a change of mind, a radical alternation in our thinking (see Rom 12:2). Explanation assumes a basic continuity between us and God, and that exactly is what we do not have. Thus the Gospel is foolishness, unreason, to ‘the Greeks’ (1 Cor 1:22-25). Only in God’s light do we see light (see Ps 119:105). Or to put that Christologically, only in the light of Christ, and thinking out from a center in him, can we come to know God rightly, coming to know the Father as Jesus the Son reveals him to us (see Matt 11:27). Knowledge of God can only happen according to the way that Christ himself provided for our understanding. Not only with respect to discipleship, but also in theology, we must learn to follow Christ, which is only possible because by grace and in the communion of the Holy Spirit, we share in his life. We approach our task with humility, drawing near to the throne of grace only because we are summoned, having access through Christ in one Spirit to the Father (Eph. 2:18). We do not storm the gates of heaven, or gather theological arguments like arrows in a quiver to use as weapons or to advance our own theological cause. We approach our work with an attitude of worship, with the deepest respect for the task before us, and perhaps even with a sense of amazement that we are here to be about this duty in the first place. Let gratitude be the mark of our endeavor, that Almighty God has called us to bring his gospel to expression as we fulfill the work of theology.

God Chooses to be Known by Us

The basic fact of theology, of Christian faith itself and of the church’s work of explication, interpretation, and proclamation of God’s revelation, arise singularly from God’s gracious willingness to reveal himself as savior and draw us into a knowing communion with himself. Jesus Christ is the crucifixion of all theology that is not Christian, and the resurrection and

therefore the possibility of all theology that is Christian, or, better said, of any theology at all. That is to say, Jesus Christ is not an addendum to the doctrine of God or some important but outer ring some way from the supposed theistic center. Jesus Christ is at once both the center of and the entryway into the doctrine of God. “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt 11:27). Here, as elsewhere throughout the New Testament, we find the ontological relation between the Father and the Son in being and act is the sole ground of revelation and salvation, and, in the final analysis, the singular content of preaching and teaching. Thus theology, and in particular the doctrine of God, is a knowledge of the Father, through the Son, and in the unity of the Holy Spirit. As such it is a theology that is at all points thorough-going as Trinity, for knowledge of God is mediated through Jesus Christ, and therefore God is known through encounter, for God is Spirit.

The basic point of theology is the more rather than less faithful knowledge of God who encounters us to the end of a right relationship with God and the faithful living of the Christian life. In a recent book, Matthew Myer Boulton has noted rightly that “for Calvin, Christian doctrine is properly conceived and articulated in the first place for the sake of Christian formation.” The goal of theology is “practical life in God.” When we get God wrong we get living in the world wrong. Theology is education in pietas and to that end is paideutic: “grateful love and reverence for God induced by relational, pragmatic knowledge of divine benefits.” In a similar vein, John Webster argues that “the end of theology is practical knowledge of God, that is, knowledge which aims at the furtherance of the life of the Christian community, the salvation of humankind, and godly discipline. Theology is thus more a process of moral and spiritual training and an exercise in the promotion of common life rather than it is a scholarly discipline. ‘Skills’ are kept firmly tied to their end; in and of itself, the cultivation of learning is profitless because, unless directed to holiness, it is not only unattached but vicious.”

13 Boulton, Life in God, 5.
Realism and Fallibility in Christology and Soteriology: All Theology is *En Route*

On August 17, 1560, the Scottish Parliament adopted a document that was four days in its writing as “doctrine founded upon the infallible Word of God.” The Scots Confession is a setting forth of the faith of the Scottish Reformers. But, as the Preface to the Confession notes, this Confession is open to amendment and correction should it be found to be contrary to God’s Word. “If any man will note in this our confession any article or sentence repugning to God’s holy word, that it would please him of his gentleness, and for Christian charity’s sake, to admonish us of the same in writing; and we, of our honour and fidelity, do promise unto him satisfaction from the mouth of God (that is, from his holy scriptures), or else reformation of that which he shall prove to be amiss.” As is common within Reformed traditions, confessions are understood as subordinate or provisional standards, not static and timeless declarations. In keeping with the notes by which the true church is determined, the confession of Christ Jesus rather than the confession of the Scots Confession is avowed, and this in local congregations rather than in some abstraction called the universal church (Article 18).

This historical reference illustrates for us how theology is an ‘open’ discipline, open, that is, to correction as Christ continues to shape the mind of the church and as the church is consequentially repentant of her theology (see Rom 3:4). There is no eternal theology; all theology is *en route*, hopefully to a deeper faithfulness. Theology is never in itself the truth, for that truth lies in Christ to whom theology bears witness. As human statements, theology suffers from all manner of problems, not the least of which is the theologian’s sin. Likewise, there is no eternal Christology and soteriology. Even the most sublime references to Jesus Christ and what he does for us do not contain the whole truth in them, but remain wracked by sin in some way or another. That is to say, Christology and soteriology as written by theologians and even as attested in official creeds of the church are fallible. Thomas Torrance has noted that “the very beliefs which we profess and formulate as obediently and carefully as we can in fidelity to God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ are themselves called into question by that revelation, *for they have their truth not in themselves*.
but in him to whom they refer.” God, in other words, is not a sentence, and is certainly not containable within our sentences. At best we try to be more rather than less faithful in our reference to Christ. But God is not reducible to sentences and arguments, for God is a personal being, uncontainable within our ideas.

The fallibility of Christology and soteriology is the predicate of the nature of God, of God’s incomprehensibility, holiness, and majesty, yet too of our humanity with all of its frailty and mis-knowing. But note these words from Karl Barth: “As ministers we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both our obligation and our inability, and by that very recognition give God the glory.” We are called thus to do what we cannot do except as God enables us by a might act of grace in giving himself to be known.

All theology is en route. Barth’s question, “What as Christians do we really have to say?” leads to one observation: all theology not only comes out of encounter with Spirit and Word, as transmitted through a tradition, and not only comes from a theologian or church, but comes also in such a form that it is written or spoken for today. Barth’s question, from his Dogmatics in Outline, was posed in 1946 amid the bombed-out ruins of Bonn University. One imagines him waving his arms at the devastation as he asks his question. We may crave certainty, but what we have is theology that is circumstantial. Nevertheless, what do we have to say? In the idiom of the writers of the Westminster Confession of Faith, 1647, for example, we may attempt to write something magisterial and definitive, nevertheless such good intentions cannot erase provisionality or fallibility. Even with our best theological sentences we see as in a mirror dimly. Creeds and theologies arise out of geographical, and, indeed, political, placement; and give guidance for the church at a particular time. Theology is always en route,

always open for correction and revision, always trying to become more faithful.

John Knox of Edinburgh burned his sermons after they were preached in the High Kirk of St. Giles. They were for this congregation, on this day. Likewise, theology is written for today, not for the future, and certainly not for eternity. The cry, “Back to Nicea,” or “Back to Westminster,” fails to understand the provisional nature of theology. Theology is not the worse for that, for the occasional character is the nature of the case. As such, all theology, like all science, is both kinetic and open-ended, and faithfulness must be worked out in terms of these given processes, rather than in propositions and deductions that are static and closed. Theology, alas, is provisional and messy.

In knowing God in Christ we are up against a fundamental mystery that is not explicable in terms of our abilities or deducible a priori, from first principles. Rather, from the side of God in the flesh of our humanity Jesus Christ, in the presence of the Spirit, confronts and encounters us, and does so on his own terms, yet in such a way that we know him by faith. As theologians our task is to clarify that knowledge. But we can only do so in terms of the nature of this mystery, and not by transmuting it into something we can grasp on our own terms or in terms of predetermined criteria for knowledge. Thus we must learn to be real in our thinking, that is, to think in a manner appropriate to that which we seek to know. At the end of the day the teaching of Evagrius of Pontus from the fourth century marks the bounds of theology: If you are a theologian you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{footnote}{\textsuperscript{19} Evagrius Ponticus, The Praktikos: Chapters on Prayer (trans. by John Eudes Bamberger OCSO; Spenser, Mass., 1970), 60, on p. 65.}\end{footnote}
The Rev. Dr. Andrew Purves

A native of Edinburgh, Scotland, the Rev. Dr. Andrew Purves received degrees in philosophy and divinity from the University of Edinburgh, and a Th.M. from Duke Divinity School. His Ph.D. is from the University of Edinburgh. Purves came to the US in 1978 and was ordained by Philadelphia Presbytery. He served as minister of the Hebron Presbyterian Church, Clinton, Pa., until 1983, when he was called to join the faculty of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Purves has a long list of publications, both books and articles, academic and popular. Recent books include *The Search for Compassion: Spirituality and Ministry, Union in Christ* (with Mark Achtemeier), *A Passion for the Gospel* (with Achtemeier), *Encountering God: Christian Faith in Turbulent Times* (with Charles Partee), *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition*, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation*, *The Crucifixion of Ministry*, and *The Resurrection of Ministry*. Purves is married to the Rev. Catherine J. Purves, minister of the Bellevue United Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh Presbytery. They have three grown children, Brendan, Gordon, and Laura.
Jean and Nancy Davis

Identical twin sisters Jean and Nancy Davis were lifelong Pittsburghers who died within four months of each other at the age of 97. Jean Davis, who died in October 2012, and her sister, Nancy, who died in February 2013, lived their entire lives in a red brick house built by their father on South Braddock Avenue in Pittsburgh’s East End. The twins’ money was largely inherited from their mother, Blanche, and father, Frank, who held the distribution franchise for the laundry whitening detergent La France, which Mr. Davis later sold and invested in other businesses. The sisters’ wealth accumulated over time with the aid of their modest lifestyles.

Both sisters attended Pittsburgh’s Winchester Thurston School. Jean graduated from Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts and also earned a degree in music from the University of Michigan. Nancy started at Mount Holyoke and graduated from the Pennsylvania College for Women, now Chatham University. Jean served with the USO in Germany and Nancy with the WAVES in the U.S. Navy. Jean headed the music department in the Tarentum schools for a short time, while Nancy worked as a secretary at Westinghouse’s Bettis facility for several years. Neither woman ever married.