

# Some Basic Theological Principles

1) The starting point of theology is faith seeking understanding, not understanding seeking faith.

2) Current theological disagreements must be addressed theologically, not in terms of alien criteria, whether those criteria be philosophical, political or sociological.

3) In the current theological crisis, the fundamental theological division has to do with the doctrine of the atonement. Specifically, is the person and work of Jesus Christ constitutive of a salvation that can be found nowhere else, and, accordingly, are the Scriptures as the authoritative witness to that salvation constitutive for our understanding of that salvation, or, conversely, are the person and work of Jesus Christ illustrative of a salvation that can be found elsewhere (or perhaps everywhere) as well, and the Scriptures accordingly illustrative of such a generally available salvation, and thus correctable in the light of it?<more/>

4) Reality is prior to the word, not the word to reality (Hilary of Poitiers). Put differently, the extra nos precedes the pro me.

5) Scripture is inherently referential, and points beyond itself to its inherently intelligible subject matter. The principle of Christological subversion means that the meaning of the metaphors and narratives of Scripture must be interpreted in light of the subject matter to which they refer, and not in light of the normal common sense meaning of the terms. So, for example, the word "Father" as applied to God is not to be understood in terms of a general meaning of the term "Father" as it might have been used in ancient Near

Eastern patriarchal culture, or in light of its contemporary usage, but in light of how Jesus used Father to refer to God in his relation as Son. Similarly, the notion of God as judge is to be understood in the light of the cross of Jesus, rather than in terms of broad forensic categories. In the person of Jesus, God takes on our judgment in the cross.

6) God is in Himself Who He is in His revelation. Accordingly, if God has revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the history of Israel, Jesus Christ and the apostolic Church, then God must be Triune in himself.

7) Theology derives its intelligibility from the inherent intelligibility of its subject matter, which is witnessed to in the canonical Scriptures. Accordingly, the Scriptures are not merely materially but formally sufficient for salvation.

8) On the question of doctrinal development, the fundamental choice is between Newman's and Barth's understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. The issue of continuity between (1) God's revelation in the history of Israel, Christ, the apostolic Church; (2) the canonical Scriptures; and (3) the post-apostolic Church, must be decided theologically, in terms of the inherent intelligibility of the subject matter of revelation, not by alien philosophical criteria rooted in such historical conundrums as the relation between the one and the many, or problems of epistemological scepticism.

9) The question of the authority of Scripture is that of the relationship between the second century Church and that of the apostles. In recognizing a canon of Scripture, the second century Church placed itself under that authority. It did not create it. In the words of Kierkegaard, an apostle is not a genius.

10) The Church has a historic hermeneutic for deciding which biblical admonitions are authoritative for today, and which have only historical relevance. This hermeneutic is found in

the distinctions between doctrinal, moral, ritual, civil, and ecclesial law, developed in the Patristic Church by theologians like Irenaeus and Augustine, formulated definitively by Thomas Aquinas, and re-affirmed in Reformation writings such as Richard Hooker's Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, The 39 Articles, and the Lutheran Confessions. This hermeneutic is not an imposition on Scripture, but a consistent development of decisions made by the apostolic Church, and witnessed to in the New Testament.

11) The *ordo essendi* (order of being) is the opposite of the *ordo cognoscendi* (order of knowing). In terms of our understanding of revelation, there are three levels of knowledge: 1) The symbols and narratives of Scripture point beyond themselves to actual historical events; 2) The actual historical events to which the narratives refer point beyond themselves to intelligible realities; 3) The intelligible ontological realities that lie behind the narratives.

In terms of knowledge, the economic Trinity precedes the immanent Trinity; in terms of ontology, the ontological precedes the historical.

12) The doctrine of creation (the relation and distinction between God and the world) provides the crucial background for other theological distinctions as well. It is fundamental for understanding not only Christology (the Son is Creator, not creature), but soteriology (redemption is not only pardon, but re-creation), grace (grace perfects nature; it does not destroy it) , the sacraments (created means of uniting humanity and divinity), and eschatology (God's final goal for creation) as well.