

# On Understanding God and Faith

[This is an address given on the occasion of my installation as Dean of the Faculty and Professor of Theology of Christian Theological Seminary in the fall of 1988. Published in *Encounter*, vol. 50, no. 2 (Spring, 1989), pp. 177-83. Used by permission. Edited. Posted 7/22/04.]

**I propose to share what some of the influences and conversation-partners I have had and continue to have.** This may give, for whatever it's worth, some insight into what animates one of my instructional concerns. A person may be widely read, and those of us in theological education certainly should. But, for me, there are some writings I read, re-read, ponder, and re-read and find new challenges with each reading. These conversation-partners are important. One may disagree with such partners, but the mere fact that the partner wrote it or said it is sufficient to make the matter worthy of my consideration. I will not bore you with a complete list of these partners, but I will mention a few.

Let me first identify the **Holy Scriptures** as a partner. From one point of view there are many voices in scripture, but the many voices develop a powerful focus and intensity when I read them as one addressed by the Word of God. These words I need to read and to hear. Some parts I will read quickly and not tarry over too long. Other parts resonate, challenge, judge, and lift up. More than this I will not say on this occasion.

Next I would mention the writings of **Søren Kierkegaard**. Here I find such a rich display of distinctions and insights, such an amazing range of different types of literature, that I return again and again. From several angles of diagnosis, Kierkegaard thought his contemporaries existed under the monstrous illusion that they were Christian and had forgotten what the distinctive concepts of the faith are and what it means to become a Christian. He designed his literature to gain the attention of his time and to move his readers against the inclinations of the age. Kierkegaard thought he was a corrective, and a sobering reminder to me is that he is a corrective even today.

Then there is the massive theological production of **Karl Barth**. When I first read Barth I felt that every basic premise and principle I held as obvious and intelligent was under sharp rebuke. The sustained emphasis on the sovereignty of God's grace as revealed in Jesus Christ, the subtle critique of tradition, and the unsurpassed freshness of scriptural exposition mark Barth as the magisterial theologian of the 20th century. As with Kant in philosophy in the 19th century one hasn't started theologizing until one has come to grips with Barth. I don't think of myself as a "Barthian," wedded to every move and utterance of his theology. I haven't even read all of what he wrote! But he is a partner, and I could not think about Christian faith without being interrogated by his dicta.

The philosophical writings of **Ludwig Wittgenstein** have had a liberating and chastening effect on me. His is not a "conclusions" philosophy that can be neatly summarized in textbooks. The way he philosophizes, the suggestions and distinctions he makes, and the fruitful, surprising examples he chooses, convey a radical impression. His assembled reminders about how we use language, how we make sense, how certain pictures can exercise a bewitching grip on our thinking, and how easy it is for contrived "intellectual" languages to go on a holiday and lose sense, have proven helpful in thinking about Christian faith and its many-sided discourse. Under the tutelage of Paul Holmer and O.K. Bouwsma, I have come to see the remarkable continuities between Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. But I should also say that I am not much impressed by some of the quick and easy adaptations of Wittgenstein to Christian theology. Wittgenstein gives you the courage to acknowledge that many intellectual issues are not so clear and that getting clear about a few elemental points is astonishingly laborious but praiseworthy.

Finally, I should mention a school of philosophers and theologians that nudge, stimulate, and provoke me. I

refer to **Whitehead and Hartshorne** and their followers, generally called “process theology.” For many years I pored over the writings of Whitehead and Hartshorne and was attracted by the prospect of a metaphysical scheme which could effectively ground Christian theology. I almost went all the way. But for a variety of reasons, I drew back, concluding that Christian theology did not need that metaphysical backing and that the picture of God was not finally satisfying. Yet this alternative approach continues to be a partner I argue with. And I look forward to a continuation of that argument with those colleagues of mine here at CTS who profess a more positive leaning toward process concepts and themes.

There are many more in tradition and contemporary life who do get my attention. Liberation theologians certainly raise questions that are far-reaching and compelling, and perhaps some will emerge as seminally powerful as the ones I have mentioned. But I think under the impetus and dialogue which my partners elicit. Perhaps in the remaining moments of this address I can suggest a few considerations which grow out of these conversations.

I have long been convinced that there is no simple definition of “theology” and that theologizing covers a complex range of activities. There is no hidden essence of theology that our intellectual deliberations must finally lay bare. When we do try to draw lines of distinction and continuity, we need to be quite clear about our purpose. I do not want to draw a tight picture of what theology is, but I do want to probe several activities that appear under that rubric and are worthy of our reflection.

Let me begin my brief investigation by way of an example drawn from a course I am currently co-teaching. Called X-815, the course aims toward a paper by senior students which conveys their understanding of the basic concepts of Christian faith, how this understanding might be justified, and how this understanding relates to the mission of the Church and their understanding of their ministerial calling. This is a large agenda. The students approach it with varying emphases and convictions. But notice the big words in this assignment: “understanding the basic concepts of the Christian faith,” “how this understanding might be justified,” and “their understanding of their ministerial calling.” **What am I asking for when I ask for “understanding?”** How will I, the teacher and reader, know when they have succeeded in understanding?

At one level, when I ask them to understand basic concepts, I think I am expecting a demonstration of familiarity with a host of utterances of scripture and the traditions of the church. With that familiarity I expect them to have the ability to identify and sort concepts and to explain them by executing several operations. I want them to explain what the concepts mean—often by using other concepts—and to make concepts into sentences and propositions, to connect these sentences together and overall to show what could be called “**the logic**” of the concepts. It is a sophisticated skill and requires sustained attention and learning to do it well.

Demonstrating that they understand the concepts, however, goes with the second part of showing how these concepts and propositions might be defended or justified. I mean nothing highfalutin or absolute by this “justification.” I don’t suppose there is perfect argument or a complex set of arguments that will lay to rest all objections to Christian faith. But I do want them to “reason” with the concepts. I want them to begin asking why they say this rather than that and how would they explain what they say. I assume that if they are going to teach the faith, they need to be clear about **why they believe their basic concepts are appropriate to the Christian faith and why they think the propositions are true. What do they mean when they speak as they do and by what authority do they speak?** Here I want them to reflect on how they use scripture, how they sift tradition, and how they relate the teachings to contemporary learning and cultures.

In conjunction with this sort of talk I often mention the need for a “theological method.” Sometimes I create in myself and others the impression that “method” must be something strict, perfectly lucid, and easily applicable to data in order to derive certifiable results. But this must be wrong-headed in theology. In actual practice we just don’t have those kinds of tight procedures. In fact, striving for this understanding of Christian faith is complex and complicated, and no one has it all perfectly in place. So maybe I should be more circumspect when I speak of method. Maybe method is just a way we have of organizing our material and showing what we mean and why we think it is true.

This quest for understanding which I urge the students toward is part and parcel of our human quest for knowledge and an unavoidable engagement for persons of learning and sophistication, and an undeniable task for persons of leadership in the Church. But my depiction of what is involved in understanding would be incomplete if I did not point to a set of issues--issues of a peculiar sort--which confront persons in relation to understanding God, faith, and oneself. We could say these issues are there for anyone who is deeply serious about the life she lives. **There is an understanding appropriate to faithfulness which uses the concepts and sentences, the language of faith, to deepen, discipline, and shape the labors of the spiritual life.**

Kierkegaard's literature is unmatched in developing a range of distinctions to keep us from forgetting that there is an understanding he called "**existential**" and there is an edification appropriate to it. I have heard that there is much talk today about "spirituality," "character," "faith development" and the proper purpose of theological education. I am not familiar with all facets of these discussions, but I do want to suggest some diagnostic points that grow out of my conversations with those partners mentioned previously.

The **first diagnostic point** is that preoccupation with those concerns of understanding which I first described leads to some misleading pictures for the second understanding, namely the understanding which Kierkegaard calls existential. This preoccupation can suggest that we are concerned for the truth, and the truth is what is the case about reality. Christian teachings declare the truth—or purport to—and must therefore meet the contemporary tests for what counts as truth and fact-stating. If we can just marshal our arguments in cogent and clear language, then we can defend the truth claims of the Christian faith. This makes it look like the really difficult task is justifying the truth claims—or at least reinterpreting the truth claims in such wise that the re-interpretation is justified. Hark to those who defend the truth claims! It almost seems that the life of faith follows naturally if one can just be sure the teachings are true. But diagnostically I want to suggest that **there is little to support this notion: that if the claims are defensible, then faith will follow as a matter of course.**

This presents a host of puzzles. What are we to do? We want the truth claims defended by the best of intelligence. But even if—and this is a big "if"—we have the claims defended, then what is implied about faith, the faith of a person? Yet surely faith as the labor of spirituality, is not just a formless mass of subjectivity and emotion. Following Kierkegaard, faith has to do with **how** a person lives, with the shape of the passions and the overriding intentionality of actual living. Kierkegaard goes on to say that **the distinctiveness of the Christian how is shaped by a relation to Jesus Christ.** But Kierkegaard is clear that there is no logical transition from believing any purported fact about Jesus Christ to the concrete living in which Jesus is Lord and Savior. Objective understanding never makes that transition. Kierkegaard is so daring at this point that he declares that objectively there is an unavoidable and irreducible uncertainty—no compelling, non question-begging and final arguments are available to assure us that Jesus is the Son of God.

As you may have surmised by now, I am perplexed. I spend an adult lifetime explicating and defending the teachings of the faith, of trying to show a passion for the truth about God, world, humanity, of contending that God is for humanity in grace—and that that is the truth! Even though I know, in spite of my appeals to revelation and to sound reasoning, that I cannot lay to rest all the questions that can be put to my defense of the faith, I still play the game of probing those teachings. And yet it appears that there is **no necessary correlation between understanding my defense of the faith and a faithful life's understanding.** Kierkegaard suggests that people often build intellectual castles in which they don't live in the humdrum of decisions and everydayness. But surely I have gone too far and put matters too severely.

How do I work my way out of this? Do I need more understanding?

**Diagnostic point two: The labor of faith cannot be cut off from the teachings of the faith.** Faith needs the shaping of the teachings, and faith cannot avoid reasoning and thinking. In fact, faith is unintelligible to us apart from the teachings. Yet, in a certain respect, it never follows necessarily that if you have skill in the understanding of the teachings, then you have faith's living understanding. There is no simple recipe of how these interrelate. Maybe the explanation of the teachings must show that their proper home is not in the interest of objective knowledge. One learns how to assert—to say and mean—the concepts of the

teachings when one engages the teachings at the deepest levels of one's life—in how one lives. **There is truth about God and the world but it is only fully understood in the practical labor of how one lives.**

**Diagnostic point three:** The intellect can be used to pursue endlessly the interpretation and justification of the teachings, but that pursuit is infinitely dialectical. Even Barth's appeal to revelation cannot, in the court of detached intelligence, refute Feuerbach. Only the fundamentalists and the Roman Catholic Church and some liberals believe there are incorrigible and infallible utterances that can objectively assure faith and produce God. As long as one stands transfixed by this epistemic situation of uncertainty or kicks repeatedly against it, the soul's wound is great and the spiritual life hemorrhages. **But the intellect can—without a false construal of the epistemic situation—be used to strengthen the character of faith, to illuminate and discipline the infinite and daily details in how a person lives her life.**

**Diagnostic point four:** It is possible to say, "God loves me and the whole creation," and yet speak empty and fail to make sense. It is even possible to have the intellectual skill to "explain" what one "means" by this utterance by having a theory about God, love, and the world. So, in a way it is possible to understand and yet fail to understand in a way appropriate to the context of faith. **To understand this utterance—to be able to say and mean it—goes with a pattern of practices that show how one regards God. The meaning of this utterance is not a private mental event independent of those practices.**

**Diagnostic point five:** I have tried to make some distinctions and draw a modest map. We can argue about these distinctions and this map and we should. It is always possible, however, that a paradox may arise: that one "understands" the teachings and yet "understands" nothing important and decisive in one's life. Let no one—student, professor, minister, or lay person—forget himself and the task of living before the living God who loves us with an unremitting love. It is the truth that God loves every human being; but this truth has no currency, no cash value in the encyclopedia of knowledge apart from the consuming passion of a concrete, laboring soul. When one is engaged in this latter way, it shows. **Not everything can be said.**