

## Editorial: "Theology Is For Confession" By Theodore J. Hopkins

Nearly thirty years ago Gerhard Forde wrote his well-known treatise *Theology Is for Proclamation*.<sup>1</sup> For me, this book was a game-changer. I began to see theology not primarily as an academic enterprise that finds the truth at all costs, but as a discipline that is fundamentally oriented to the church and directed toward a specific end: God's eschatological announcement of the Gospel message in Jesus Christ, "Your sins are forgiven." This understanding of theology has continued to propel my own teaching at the university level, and Forde's distinction between explanation and proclamation remains a necessary distinction so that the gospel is not elided by a system. In Forde's own metaphor, the distinction helps to ensure the bridegroom is heard saying, "I love you," to his bride and not merely a lecture on the nature of love.

With some trepidation and a recognition of the continuing significance of Forde's work, I wish to put forward an alternative to broaden and enrich his proposal that theology is for proclamation. I believe it is more helpful to say that theology is for confession.<sup>2</sup> Before I describe what that means, let me explain why I think the adjustment is necessary: the church. Forde's notion of proclamation easily separates Christians from each other so that every Christian stands before God, yes, but all seem to stand in their own separate space, hearing their own personal proclamation. The preacher and the hearer are all that is necessary for the proclamation to take place, and a robust sense of Christian community falls to the wayside as unnecessary or unimportant.<sup>3</sup> The problem is exacerbated in an American context where individualism is assumed, and Americans can hardly see, let alone express, the social nature of faith, work, or even public life. Moreover, America is the land of novelty and utilitarian thinking, which has thrown away the old wine skins of history and tradition to embrace the new wine of the therapeutic.<sup>4</sup> In short, the idea that theology is solely for proclamation endangers the church by truncating it both in time and in space. The church is truncated spatially by placing the individual before God with little consideration of the corporate body. The church is truncated temporally by emphasizing the proclamation in the present in such a way that the individual is separated from the saints of old and the confession of faith in the past. Proclamation loses the church.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Paul Hinlicky has rightly placed confession as central to dogmatics. Hinlicky writes, "I will argue that public confession, not (supposedly) righteous political interventions in the mixed society of the common body, is the fruit by which theology is known, tested, and judged." Paul R. Hinlicky, *Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics After Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 24.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Paulson, a student of Forde and himself a noted Lutheran theologian, shows just what this looks like. Paulson sums up his basic ecclesiology: "The Holy Spirit works anew all that is needed by bringing Christ to his sinners via the preaching office." Steven D. Paulson, "Do Lutherans Need a New Ecclesiology?" *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001): 217. Paulson's more recent book reiterates the same perspective. Steven D. Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, Doing Theology series (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 237–40. For criticisms of Forde's ecclesiology, see Cheryl M. Peterson, *Who is the Church? An Ecclesiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 45–8.

<sup>4</sup> I mention therapy precisely because proclamation can easily be interpreted in a therapeutic framework. See Theodore J. Hopkins, "Theology in a Post-Christian Context: Two Stories, Two Tasks," *Concordia Theological Journal* 4, no. 2 (2017): 49–54.

For these reasons, I suggest instead that theology is for confession. What does this mean? Theology as a discipline of the church is to "foster, advocate, and drive to" confession.<sup>5</sup> First, this means that theology drives to confession of sins and the good news of the absolution. That is, theology is not designed to simply provide eternal answers to theological questions but to open space for repentance and the proclamation of God's promises in Jesus. In this aspect of my suggestion, I am not intending to say anything other than what Forde has elucidated so well already. Second, this means that theology is to advocate and foster a robust confession of faith. Just as the divine service moves from proclamation in confession and absolution to the confession of the Creed, so too theology must cultivate a true, robust, and meaningful confession of the Christian faith. To use Forde's imagery of love with the bridegroom and the bride, theology's role is not only to make space for the bridegroom to proclaim his love but also to describe Christ the groom and narrate his story in such a way that the bride knows the groom, delights in speaking about the groom, and sees him as her whole world. In other words, the church learns to understand who Jesus is, confesses her faith in him boldly, confesses him in praise joyfully, and knows all reality in relation to him.

I believe that this notion that theology is to foster confession is more helpful than Forde's understanding of theology for proclamation for five reasons. First, as I use the term, confession includes the moment of an encounter with the Gospel that Forde intends with his emphasis upon proclamation. That is, it incorporates Forde's valid and important concerns even as it allows for a richer, multidimensional understanding of the purpose of theology. Second, whereas proclamation tends toward individualization, confessions of faith are social in character. Many Christians learn to confess the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds together in church community before they ever understand the depth and nature of these words. Third, confession not only connects Christians to one another in the present church community, but confession also directs Christians to see their words in unity with the church of the past. As Christians learn to speak the ancient words of confession, they learn from the fathers, the martyrs, and the church now at rest to confess Christ. A theology that cultivates confession will thus learn from history and use the good, true, and right dogma of the church for teaching and maturation in faith. Fourth, confession emphasizes a more positive role that theology can play in describing the reality that Christians live in every day. A theology that fosters confession would play a role related to the Holy Spirit's work of sanctification, shaping God's people to have the mind of Christ. Finally, confession is always done in the world today. Thus, a theology that fosters confession must seek to understand the world in which we live so that Christians can learn to confess the ancient faith in a new register for the contemporary world. My point is not merely that theology must be applied today, but it must take seriously the structures of reality, the data and evidence from the social sciences, psychology, and religious studies, among others.<sup>6</sup> Confession happens in the real world studied by these various disciplines, and theology must learn to understand this reality to speak God's truth for those living in it.

If this suggestion only steers one toward talking about God and away from doing the deed of proclaiming the gospel, then tear these pages out and throw them away (or delete the .pdf

---

<sup>5</sup> I'm using Forde's exact language here. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Christine Helmer rightly argues that doctrine has a place outside of narrow ecclesiastical and academic theological circles. See Christine Helmer, *Theology and the End of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014), esp. 149–69.

and empty the trash bin). Such is neither my desire nor intention. Pastors and all Christians must divide Law and Gospel in such a way that the good news of Jesus the Savior is spoken, I to you, the bridegroom to his bride. Only when the promise is given will sinners believe and respond in confession. Thus, if my suggestion has any merit, it will not be to curtail proclamation but to widen the eyes of the church so that Christians who are addressed by the bridegroom come and see their lives with others who also have been addressed by the same Lord. Christians would come to see themselves as the children of God who learn to confess the same crucified Christ in their words and praise the Triune God with their lips together with the whole church past and present, and to the world in which they dwell. Such a goal, however, will take more than a change in slogan.

Theodore J. Hopkins  
Co-Managing Editor of CTJ