

**COMMENTARY ON INVITATION TO CROSS-CULTURAL THEOLOGY: CASE
STUDIES IN VERNACULAR THEOLOGIES
BY WILLIAM A. DYRNESS**

Page 16, top paragraph. The concept of ***vernacular theology*** is introduced. Can the doing of theology as we have defined the term be “intuitive?” The Christian gospel and its application is, for the most part, counterintuitive.

Pages 22 & 23. Dyrness proposes that a theological dialog is in order between the west and the theologians of the 10 – 40 window, where such rapid growth is taking place in a number of places. We represent rapid growth in this context in terms of the number of people coming to faith in Christ. In the West, what we have gained in methodological sophistication, we have lost in the area of an intimate relationship with God and relevance of our theology to practice. Thus, we stand to gain at least as much from such dialog as we are able to contribute.

Pages 24 & 25. In drawing from work in sociology and anthropology, Dyrness introduces a concept of ***culture*** attributed to Clifford Geertz. Effectively, he states that a culture is characterized by a representational world (RW) that its people embrace in common. It should be noted in this regard there must exist a Christian culture that is characterized by an RW derived from Scripture. Drawing from the work of Grenz & Franke, such as in *Beyond Foundationalism*,¹ the Holy Spirit is active in a Christian community in His ministry of appropriating Scripture and applying it to the building of a biblical RW in the minds of believers – that is, an RW constructed from biblical representations.

1 Refer to Item (zd) in the list of resources for our course, *Toward an Integrative Theology in Community and in Culture*.

Page 25ff, bottom paragraph. In this paragraph, which continues onto the following page, Dyrness quotes Clifford Geertz's definition of religion. Interpreting this definition in representational language, the representational world (RW) that is constructed by a given religious community from their sacred texts is powerful in regard to both the representation of reality and the motivation and guidance of behavior for that community. However, the sacred text or texts on which the RW is based need not be factual. While Geertz's definition of religion is generally applicable, we are only interested in a definition like this that applies to the Christian religion – in fact, only the evangelical branch of Christianity. In applying Geertz's definition to evangelical Christianity, we are mindful of the work of Stanley Grenz and John Franke as expressed in *Beyond Foundationalism*. Grenz & Franke discuss the RW that the Holy Spirit constructs within a particular community of Christians as He appropriates the sacred text of Scripture and authoritatively applies it in the minds and hearts of the members of that community. However, according to the conception of Grenz & Franke, the biblical text need not be inherently authoritative for this to take place. In fact, according to their formulation the authority of the biblical text is entirely a function of the Spirit's appropriation of it. Thus, the formulation of Grenz & Franke accords with Geertz's definition of religion, but it is at variance with our conviction that the sacred text of Scripture is inherently authoritative. We could assert that the formulations of Geertz and Grenz & Franke accord with the neo-orthodox formulation that emanates from the thinking of Soren Kiekegaard. According to neo-orthodoxy, the biblical text is powerful in the way described by Geertz without necessarily being factual. However, according to the theory of true narratives propounded by John W. Oller, Jr., only narratives which are true can support and sustain generalizations, such as the theological principles that we derive from the biblical text. Therefore, according to our formulation, the theological authority and integrity of the biblical text rests upon its historical factuality.

Page 27, paragraph beginning about 1/3 down. In this paragraph, Dyrness speaks of the “methodological atheism” of sociology in quoting from the work of Peter

Berger. In other words, the formulation of a sociologist is shorn of any religious significance, and it is therefore neutral in regard to theology, morality, and ethics. That is, it is merely descriptive and in nowise prescriptive. In the following paragraph Dyrness recognizes the problems created by Geertz's definition of religion and the methodological atheism of sociology in the mind of an evangelical Christian.

Page 29, last paragraph in section. Dyrness concludes his discussion of *The Tools of Sociologists and Anthropologists*, which commenced on page 23, with the assertion that these tools may afford to us a method for listening across cultural boundaries. However, because of the impoverished nature of these tools and methods relative to issues of central importance to evangelical Christianity, it is by no means clear what application they may have.

Page 31, middle paragraph. Dyrness commenced his discussion of *A New Dimension of the Study of Theology: Vernacular Theology* on page 29. The purpose of this discussion appears to be the weaving together of a method for applying the tools of sociology and anthropology to cross-cultural theology. By the middle of page 31 he has asserted that the discipline of theology is entirely descriptive in its function, not prescriptive. According to his emerging formulation of vernacular theology, a given Christian community may be motivated by a theology that is intuitively based and not articulated in any systematic way. To assert that such a community "lacks" any theology or is "spiritually immature" because their theology is not systematized would be off the mark, according to Dyrness.

Following are the definitions we have adopted for purposes of our course *Toward an Integrative Theology in Community and in Culture*:

For the purposes of this course, we define ***doing theology*** as the act of deriving theological principles from Scripture through proper hermeneutical procedure and skillfully applying those principles to the practical issues of life and ministry in

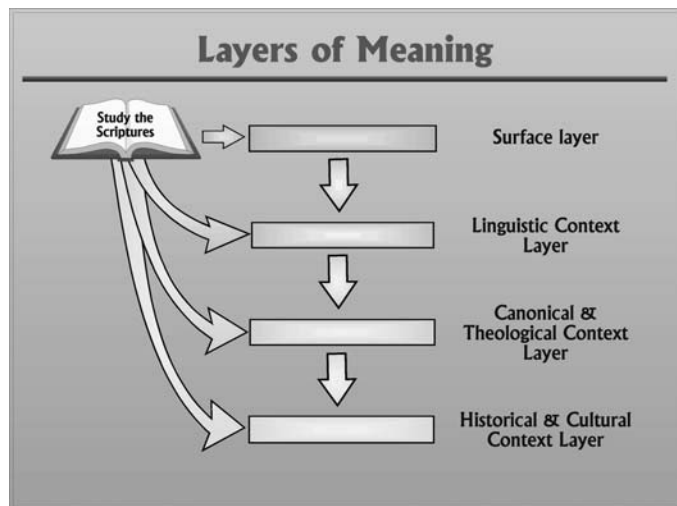
community and in culture. Moreover, we define ***theological education*** as the pedagogical process by which those who have embraced Jesus Christ as Savior and have placed themselves under His authority as Lord acquire skill in doing theology. The scope and rigor of theological education required by a disciple of Christ is a function of his or her ministry identity, defined as the unique profile of talents and endowments that determine the particular set of ministry arenas in which he or she can perform with great power, impact, and fruitfulness.

Theology as habitus is the desired outcome of theological education whereby the disciple habitually applies theological principles to all aspects of life and ministry, and he or she thereby walks in the way of Christ and the apostles – that is, the way of wisdom. The overall objective of this course is to derive from the teachings of Christ and the apostles a biblical theology of theological education, and thereby to lay the foundation for a lifetime of study leading to individual and communal skill at doing theology. The course includes a critique of the traditional approach to theological education, the setting forth of a new paradigm for church-based theological education, and the derivation from Scripture of a normative outline of what the servant of Christ ought to know theologically, and in what order.

Would Dyrness assert that our definition of “doing theology” is already too systematized? Is the requirement that doing theology necessarily involves “deriving theological principles from Scripture through proper hermeneutical procedure and skillfully applying those principles to the practical issues of life and ministry in community and in culture” overly restrictive? Does it make unnecessary assumptions concerning the process whereby theological principles are derived from the text of Scripture? Reflecting on this possibility, we must recognize all manner of examples of persons and whole communities who operate according to vernacular theologies that are in error – that is, ones that are derived from a misreading and even a misrepresentation of Scripture. Therefore, I believe the requirement of “proper hermeneutical procedure” is both valid and necessary. What is negotiable is the

degree of formal training in hermeneutics and exegesis. In other words, persons may possess an intuitive sense of how to derive the author's intended meaning from a biblical text, and their minds may be thoroughly submitted to the authority of the text and the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit, and yet they may not be able to articulate their hermeneutical procedure in any kind of systematic way. In fact, an intuitive theology which is habitually practiced may lie at the heart of what we actually mean by **doing theology as habitus**. The question we must ask in this regard is the following: how does one acquire such an intuitive theology when so much of biblical truth is counterintuitive? Furthermore, what role does TE play in the acquisition of such an intuitive theology?

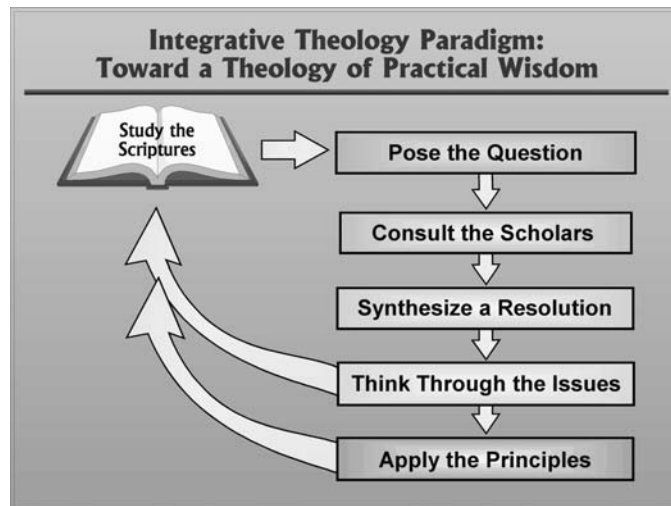
Layers of Meaning. I assert with extensive biblical warrant that spiritual maturity in the sense of ingrained theological principles that are practiced at an intuitive level is strictly a function of the degree of our engagement with Scripture. On this basis, perhaps a way to understand the value of TE is to see it as the



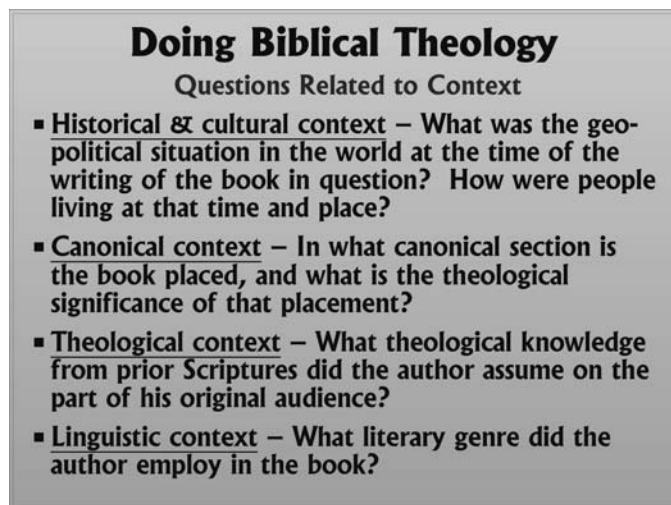
means to penetrate more deeply into the meaning Scripture. As illustrated in the adjoining figure, such deeper penetration into the meaning of a passage of Scripture may be seen as largely a function of a better understanding of the context of the passage.

Page 33, opening of new section, first two paragraphs. It is becoming clear that what Dyrness means by vernacular theology is the unarticulated and unsystematic network of theological principles that motivate practice in a given Christian community. The doing of theology is, according to his definition, a descriptive exercise rather than a prescriptive one.

Page 35, bottom paragraph. In this paragraph Dyrness presents his recommendation for theological education. I believe he is reacting to the customary systematic method of doing theology. He makes no mention of the derivation of normative principles from Scripture. What about our integrative theology paradigm, which is delineated in the adjoining figure? I believe our objective is the same as that of Dyrness – that is, a theology of practice or theology as habitus.



Posing the question. Posing questions in the course of studying a passage of Scripture is the method of unfolding deeper layers of meaning. The adjoining figure and those on the following page unfold the sequence of questions that the exegete needs to ask of the text in order to derive, to the fullest extent possible, the meaning intended by the author and understood by his original audience.



Pursuing spiritual maturity. I have asserted that spiritual maturity is a function of the degree and depth of engagement with the language of Scripture with a mind that is submitted to the authority of the text and the ministry the Holy Spirit in applying the text to the transformation of mind and character. The more time that a person devotes to reading, studying, meditating upon, and memorizing the language of

Doing Biblical Theology – Cont.:

Questions Related to Content

- **Having read a chapter-length passage from the book in question...**
 - What noteworthy observations obtain?
 - Are there repeated words, phrases, or formulas that indicate points of emphasis?
 - Are there words, phrases, or figures of speech that allude to prior Scripture?
 - If so, chase down these allusions and note their significance.
 - Are there turns of language that are startling or unexpected in reference to prior Scripture?
 - If so, chase down such turns and note their significance.

Doing Biblical Theology – Cont.:

Questions Related to Principles

- **Having read a chapter-length passage from the book in question...**
 - Are there theological principles that surface in the passage in question?
 - Are there clues to indicate whether the author intended these to be read as normative?
 - Or, are they bound to the particular historical and cultural context of the book?
 - Are there theological types, models, or prefigurations employed or referred to in the passage?
 - If so, what is the significance of these in regard to the theological message of the passage?

Scripture, and the more deeply he or she penetrates into the meaning of Scripture, the greater the level of spiritual maturity that is realized.

The Apostle Peter's outline.² According to the Apostle Peter, progress in spiritual maturity is measured by the presence of

the following seven virtues in increasing measure: moral excellence, experiential knowledge, self control, patient endurance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and self-sacrificing love. In 2 Peter 1:4 he represents the goal or end state of spiritual maturity as our having “become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.” What does Peter mean by our becoming partakers of the divine nature? Clearly, our destiny is not to become little gods, but rather it is to become like God in terms of our nature and character. In particular, becoming partakers of the divine nature means becoming like Jesus Christ. Perhaps we could further represent Peter's meaning by describing spiritual maturity in terms of ***experiencing fellowship with God the Father like Jesus did.*** This entails our experiencing His power flowing through our lives; being guided by His Spirit; walking

Doing Biblical Theology – Cont.:

Questions Related to Theological Message

- **Having read the entire book in question...**
 - What is the main theological point or message that the author intended to convey?
 - What are the ancillary or subordinate theological points or messages that the author intended to convey?
 - What linguistic tools did the author employ to convey these theological points or messages?
 - What normative theological principles emerge from the entire book?
 - How do these normative principles impact my own life and ministry?
 - What actions will I take to implement these principles?

2 Refer to *The Spiritual Formation Process: the Apostle Peter's Outline*, Academic Monograph BT-1.

in His way; fearing, loving and serving Him; and habitually abiding in His holy presence covered by the precious blood of His Son.

The role of TE in the attainment of spiritual maturity thus defined is supportive. I affirm that the principal dynamic involved in the spiritual maturation process is engagement with the language of Scripture with a mind submitted to its authority and to the sanctifying ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's sanctifying ministry involves His appropriating Scripture and powerfully applying it to our lives to bring about transformation of character and increasing conformity to the likeness of Jesus Christ. TE enables us to penetrate more deeply into the meaning of Scripture, thereby amplifying the ministry of the Spirit. In fact, our participation in TE according to the manner in which we have defined it is an effective way in which we can cooperate with the Spirit in the process of sanctification and spiritual maturation.