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STEWARDS OF THE MYSTERIES OF GOD¹

Douglas John Hall

The practice of stewardship has been one of the strengths of Protestantism in its New World settings. This was obviously a case of necessity. While in the state churches of Europe the problem of financing the faith was taken care of by public funds, the non-conformist churches in both Europe and North America and other European satellites had to fend for themselves. The practice of stewardship grew in response to this need.

But while a great deal of attention was paid to stewardship practice in the self-supporting denominations of the New World, very little attention was paid to the theology of stewardship—which, as I suggested in the earlier address, is much broader and more inclusive than the internal workings of the church itself.

When it comes to the theology of stewardship, no scriptural text is more important—and, I think, more neglected—than the Pauline verse on which I would like to ask you to meditate now, namely, I Corinthians 4:1: *This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and*

stewards of the mysteries of God. If the metaphor of stewardship applies in its broadest sense to the vocation of the human being within the sphere of creation (the thesis of my first lecture), its application to the church specifically—and more particularly to ministry within the church—is to be located in this text. Like all human beings, Christians, whether lay or ministerial, are to think of themselves as stewards of God’s creation; but in addition to this general human calling, Christians—and particularly those who teach within the church—are to consider it their special vocation to be “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.”

To state this in other language, it is the calling of all Christians—but particularly of those who teach and preach—to be theologians: to study, question, reflect upon, and discourse with others about the foundational teachings of the faith, and to seek ways in which these “mysteries” can be communicated to the world in which they find themselves. Theology is not reserved for professionals; it is the task of all Christians. But in Paul’s mind it is the calling, in particular, of the teaching ministry. It is indeed the primary calling of the teaching ministry.

I suppose that, as a theologian myself, I have a certain bias here; but it has struck me again and again throughout the almost half-century since my ordination that ministers are called upon to do so many other things that theological work turns out to be the last item on our list of priorities. There are exceptions to the rule, of course, but it seems to me to be pretty much still the case that clergy spend very little time reading, contemplating, and discussing with one another and with their parishioners what Paul names here as the chief thing for which we should be regarded. This is obviously not a fault of clergy alone; for congregations rarely reward their ministers for being theologians. In fact, on the whole—in the past—theologians in ministry have been rather shunned; for they always want people to *think*, and—again, in the past—what many if not most people have wanted from religion is an escape from thought: escape into action,

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escape into liturgy, escape into piety, or simply to have their minds turned off for at least one hour weekly.

I say ‘in the past’, though I know that it is not all past; there is still a great deal of this kind of expectation at work in the churches. But in the meantime something else has been occurring as well: As the allures of secularism have increased, and as the great variety of religious practice and belief have grown, and as the churches (particularly those of the Protestant main stream) have diminished, those who remain in the churches feel an increasing need to contemplate the reason why? Why Christian? There are lots of alternatives to Christianity now. And the fringe benefits of being Christian are few and far between. So why remain?

Besides, the great problems and crises of life in the contemporary world seem to defy conventional religion, including Christianity. The Christian answers that contented our forebears do not content us today, because the questions different—many of them are far more complex. I for one don’t think we are wiser than our forebears, but we are certainly more complicated. Those who do remain in the churches, even if they may seem content with the old religious cliches, do not in reality find comfort or hope in them; because the things that make for discomfort and despair today are far more complex and interwoven than the problems faced by our grandparents and great-grandparents. For instance, how do you wage war against terrorism? It was one thing to wage war against Nazism, or even communism; but how do you combat the enemies that are apt to be your own fellow-citizens, as was the case in London last July, let alone understand the causes that lead to such acts? And that is of course only one of countless complicated ethical problems for which we can find very little precedent in Christian history and historical doctrine.

Thus the need for theological seriousness and sophistication has grown even as the churches of the main stream have diminished statistically and in terms of social influence. I wonder how many clergy today sense this need—this vacuum of understanding and wisdom, this silent demand for greater depth in our Christian response to the world in which we live. I do not mean this as a criticism, but it seems to me that being a parish minister today must mean feeling an enormous frustration when one considers how much of one’s time must still be spent on organizational and vaguely pastoral concerns and how little time and energy is left over for becoming more competent and wise ‘teaching elders’ (to use the Reformed terminology). For I think that more and more clergy are aware of the still-rather-inarticulate and silent longing of ordinary churchgoers for sound and thoughtful teaching.

Moreover—and here I am moving towards the chief thing that I want to say today—we who stem from the main streams of Reformation Christianity find ourselves, in this society, representatives of traditions that are hardly recognized any more by vast numbers of our fellow-citizens. Recently, in connection with the new film about the life of Luther, starring Joseph Finnes, I discovered that according to some poles of public opinion the very name of Martin Luther is unheard-of by something over 80% of the American populous: most of those polled thought the pollster was talking about Martin Luther King. If so basic an historical fact is unknown to so many, one can only imagine how more theologically- and biblically-specific facts stand with our populous. I suspect that a teaching like ‘justification by grace through faith’, or ‘*sola scriptura*’ are as foreign to the general population of our two countries as the legends of the Chinese or the ancient Norsemen.

But the problem is greater still. Not only is classical Protestantism sociologically sidelined today, but it has been replaced in the public forum by forms of Protestantism that all

the major Reformers of the 16th Century would regard as strange and bizarre, if not plainly heretical. Even the enthusiasts of the Left Wing of the Reformation—the people Luther called ‘*die Schwaermer*’—would be astonished, I am sure, if they were to find themselves in the more popular, allegedly Protestant churches in this country.

I do not mean this as a ‘put-down’ of anyone, even the most fantastic of the sects by which we are today surrounded (and outnumbered!), but simply in terms of historical, biblical and theological accuracy one has to draw distinctions. The new *Encyclopaedia of Protestantism*² (a large, four-volume affair that contains—by the way—no article on ‘stewardship’) does just that. Its analysis of ‘Protestantism’ distinguishes between what it calls “classical” or “core” Protestantism and what it calls “wider Protestantism”. This so-called wider Protestantism is so wide that it cannot be easily characterized, let alone defined; so that the *Encyclopaedia* ends by including in that category every self-announced Christian body that is not Roman Catholic or eastern Orthodox.

And let us not fool ourselves: it is this so-called ‘wider Protestantism’ that is growing, not only in the United States but also in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It sets the tone, publicly, for what is recognized as ‘Christianity’. How could the majority of U.S. and Canadian citizens not believe that Christianity is a biblicistic, doctrinally fundamentalist, and ethically ultra conservative religion when they are bombarded daily by television and other media and pop-cultural input that reinforces exactly such an imagine of our faith. And I will not even speak of the machinations of the so-called Christian Right in this country, which in addition to the captivation of the media has succeeded in making itself indispensable to the political Right.³

² Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., New York and London: Routledge, 2004

³ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., writing in THE NEW YORK TIMES on September 18, 2005, introduces his article (called “Forgetting Reinhold Niebuhr”) in this way: **“The recent outburst of popular religiosity in the United States is a most dramatic and unforeseen development in American life. As Europe grows more secular, America grows**

Meanwhile, the remnants of once-mainline Protestantism seem humiliated and lacking in self-confidence. Well, we had assumed—hadn't we? —that our future was guaranteed. We were the religious establishment. Every new generation would follow the old generation into the pews as a matter of course, automatically! We didn't really have to provide "reasons for the hope that is in us"; we would continue, and prosper, simply because we were an integral part of the American way. But we are not prospering, even if a few of us seem to be maintaining the status quo; and I think that most of us are so baffled by the new situation of our denominations in this changed and changing society that we are reduced to silence, and often dispirited.

In these circumstances, one cannot help being concerned about the future of Protestantism. On the one hand, we are surrounded by noisy expressions of a so-called Protestantism that would not be recognized by any of the major Reformers of the 16th century or its antecedents; on the other hand, we ourselves are uncertain and rather demoralized by the religious situation, and hardly find it within ourselves to explore the classical traditions of our faith with the discipline, imagination and daring that are necessary to articulate these received teachings in ways that meet and respond to the great questions that history has thrown at us.

How can we feel the confidence that Paul expresses in this text? -- *This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God!*

Now I am not ready to equate what Paul here calls "the mysteries of God" with the classical Protestant doctrine and ethos. The faith of the Reformers, by its own standards of measurement, would abhor any suggestion that Reformation teaching of whatever branch of

more devout. George W. Bush is the most aggressively religious president Americans have ever had. American conservatives applaud his 'faith-based' presidency, an office heretofore regarded as secular. The religious right has become a potent force in national politics. Evangelicals now outnumber mainline Protestants and crowd megachurches. Billy Graham attracts supplicants by the thousand in Sodom and Gomorrah, a k a New York City. The Supreme Court broods over the placement of the Ten Commandments. Evangelicals take over the Air Force Academy, a government institution maintained by

Protestantism had captured once and for all the eternal and transcendent truth of God. The truth of God is a living truth and does not lend itself to once-for-all containment and definition in doctrine, dogma, and creed. The Protestant Principle, as Tillich identified it, is precisely that nothing finite can contain the infinite, nothing relative the absolute, nothing temporal the eternal. So we are not allowed to say that the defeat of classical Protestantism would be a defeat of transcendent truth. All of our denominations, our ‘churches’, are historical phenomena: they had a beginning some 500 years ago or so, and they will no doubt have an ending. The mysteries of God of which we are stewards are not identical with any of our churches, their history, their ethos, their doctrine.

Yet—as I put it in the essay on this topic, which I included, in my most recent book, *Bound and Free*⁴—I am concerned that what the struggles of the Reformation produced by way of a better expression of biblical faith should not be lost to the world. And I am concerned that something might come to be and flourish that calls itself Protestant yet in essence has little to do with that classical Protestant heritage and may, in fact, represent religious and moral assumptions antithetical to that heritage. And I am concerned, too, that that heritage should not be reduced to the kind of traditionalism that is nothing but “the dead faith of the living”. Stewarding the Protestant tradition means listening attentively to “the living faith of the dead” so that the present community of discipleship may find its way into the future.

When I speak of classical Protestantism, therefore, I am not speaking about a Protestantism that is content simply to perpetuate the teachings of Martin Luther, John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli, John Knox, and the others. I mean a Protestantism that has so absorbed those

taxpayers’ dollars; the academy’s former superintendent says it will be six years before religious tolerance is restored. Mel Gibson’s movie, ‘Passion of the Christ’ draws nearly \$400 million at the domestic box office.”

⁴ Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005

foundational traditions that it is able to deconstruct and reconstruct them in the light of the exigencies of the present and impending future.

Now, so as not to end in mere generalities, I would like to suggest some of the key concepts that form the groundwork of this classical Protestantism as I understand it. I have developed six such concepts in the essay to which I have just referred; and there I elaborated on them at greater length than I shall be able to do here, so I would like to refer you to the essay for any further thought about them. In each case, a positive teaching at the same time negates or critiques a point of view with which it is related.

(1) Christocentrism (**contra Christomonism**)—so, for example, in the first principle, the *christocentrism* of classical Protestantism negates christomonism. All the Reformers are quite clear that the centre and foundation of the Christian faith is our confession of Jesus as the Christ. The most important of all the ‘only’ statements of the Reformers (only grace, only faith, only scripture—*sola gratia, sola fide, sola scriptura*)—the most *indispensable* of all these ‘only’ statements is ‘only through Christ’, *per Christum solum*. To be Christian, in their understanding, means to confess that it is only through Jesus, the Christ, that we are made right with God; and when this confession is not present then the church has denied its very foundation. Christianity is ‘christocentric’—centred in the Christ.

But this positive affirmation must not be turned into a myopic concentration on Christ that ends by excluding all other testimony to the love and mystery of the divine—it must not become *christomonistic*. When that happens, the Trinitarian basis of our understanding of God has been sacrificed in favour of an exclusivism that, in excluding all others, excludes also the two other ‘persons’ of the trinity. And that, according to H. Richard Niebuhr, is precisely the danger of a great deal of religion in North America. In becoming fixed on and transfixed by

Jesus—or rather, its own ideas about Jesus. It substitutes for Trinitarian theology what Niebuhr called “a unitarianism of the second person of the Trinity.” Whereas, if the trinity is maintained in our thinking about God, we are obliged to consider the work of the Father and the Spirit—and therefore, in the most practical way, to consider the testimony of religions other than Christianity. Through the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, particularly, we are open to dialogue with the non-Christian religions in a way that a faith fixated only on its conception of Jesus tends to exclude.

(2) The Priority of Grace (contra voluntarism and determinism). The second major principle of classical Protestantism that I would single out is the priority of divine grace: *sola gratia*. We are “justified by grace through faith”—and I remember how Paul Tillich always insisted on that way of formulating the central, substantive teaching of the Reformation: not justification by faith, which tends to make faith a work, but justification by grace, which we apprehend by faith.

Now this positive principle excludes two other, antithetical ideas. First, we are not justified by our own volition, our own will, our own works. God’s grace precedes and enables our decision and act of faith. And secondly, we are not justified by a divine grace that simply ignores our own will. Both voluntarism and determinism (or fatalism) are ruled out. Of course, Calvin got into some trouble at this point, because his conception of grace tended towards philosophic determinism, as if God had determined long beforehand who would be redeemed and who would not. But even Calvin was not simply a fatalist where the question of redemption is concerned; and as for Luther, he was at pains to be faithful both to the idea of God’s initiative and our human response, our responsibility.

3. The Dialectical Character of Theology (contra doctrinal simplism): The third principle of classical Protestantism I would name is what I call the ‘dialectical’ character of theology, which is opposed to a purely linear way of thinking. ‘Dialectical’ means the kind of thinking that insists on examining opposing sides of a reality. It assumes that truth is (as I said earlier) a living reality that cannot be captured in straightforward, 1-2-3- kinds of propositions, but must be considered in terms of the seeming contradictions and paradoxes that living realities manifest. There must be about it, therefore, an ‘on the one hand’ and ‘on the other hand’.

Of all the Reformers, Luther was a thoroughly dialectical thinker —partly because he was the inheritor of the mystical tradition, and therefore he could not, in a simple, straightforward sort of way, put down Christian truth in easy propositions. Even his catechisms do not do this. His central ideas are all of them complex, because they are striving to do justice to the tensions that living truth—“the mysteries of God”—necessarily entails. For instance that we are *simul justus et peccator*—simultaneously justified and sinful; or that God is at the same time revealed and hidden in his revelation. These are paradoxes, not contradictions, that inhere in the mystery of our faith; and therefore they must not be reduced to simplistic, one-sided dogmas.

That puts a considerable demand upon ordinary Christians. Protestantism, as some have said, has a high expectation of human beings, for it assumes that they are able to contemplate the ineffability of divine truth—it assumes they are capable of . . . theology! And not only those who are professionally trained!

And, my friends, there is a great deal of simplistic religion in our midst! Exaggerated and one-sided claims abound, and many avid churchgoers in our society substitute for a faith that is ready to contemplate mystery a rote sort of religiosity that is little more than dogmatism, based

on the authority of some evangelical celebrity whose talents as an entertainer have lent him a reputation for wisdom.

(4) Faith Seeks Understanding (contra both rationalism and irrationalism). This leads to my fourth principle: Classical Protestantism believes that it is part of the nature of true faith that it seeks understanding. It is not satisfied with blind belief, it is driven to comprehend what it believes and to be able to articulate its belief. Such a positive stand is at the same time a critique of both rationalism and irrationalism. It critiques rationalism, because the truth of revelation transcends reason; but neither is it a form of irrationalism, because what God does ‘in Christ’ has a certain reasonableness that, given faith, a person is able to grasp. As Blaise Pascal wrote, “If we submit everything to reason, our religion will have no mysterious and supernatural element. If we offend the principle of reason, our religion will be absurd and ridiculous.” So the Reformers—all of them, even most of the ‘spiritualists’ of the radical Reformation—were at pains to explain why they believed what they believed. They did not reduce revelation to purely rational dimensions; yet they felt that God does not act absurdly or in a merely arbitrary way—that the gospel really does speak to the human situation, and therefore that Christians have an obligation to communicate their faith to those outside the faith in terms that are at least humanly recognizable. If you think of all the literary works—all the words! — that Calvin and Luther and the others left us, you realize that their stewardship of the mysteries of God involved a high degree of intellectual labour. It was not all just spiritualistic babbling. They wanted to be understood. Like Paul in his discussion of glossolalia, the Reformers felt that it was better to say five words that could be understood than to engage in all sorts of spiritual gymnastics without the prospect of communication.

(5) The Indispensability of the Bible (contra Biblicism and Bible Illiteracy).

Classical Protestantism regards the Bible with every bit as much reverence as Fundamentalism. Ignore the Bible, said Luther, and you leave yourself open to the arbitrary ideas and idiocies of human beings! The so-called *formal principle* of the Reformation was the teaching of ‘scripture alone’ (*sola scriptura*): that is, only the Bible has primacy of authority among all the other real and possible authorities claimed by religious faith.

But none of the Reformers were biblical literalists (whatever that may mean!). Some of them, including Calvin, may not have guarded sufficiently against making the Bible a “paper pope”; but even Calvin’s conception of the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures must not be transmuted into a rigid concept of the literal inerrancy of Scripture and the inspiration of every word. As for Luther, I need not say in this audience that he could be quite free in his selection of the most authoritative passages of scripture. It is the spirit and not the letter that brings the Word of God to life. And what the divine Spirit wishes us particularly to hear in the Scriptures is its testimony to the centrality of the Christ—*was Christum treibet*. When the Bible’s testimony is a testimony to *itself*, something has gone wrong. For its true witness is not to itself but to the divine Word that transcends its words and is expressible only, finally, in the incarnate Word, the living Word that defies containment in human words. The Bible, Luther was fond of saying, “has a wax nose”. It may be twisted in whatever way you like—always with a view to legitimating your own words, your own assumptions and pet peeves. God’s Word transcends all our words, our theories and creeds, our systematic theologies and summaries of doctrine. God’s Word is expressible only, finally, in the incarnate Word, the living Word that defies containment in human words, ideas, thoughts.

And I do not have to say that most of what one hears in our social setting by way of Bible talk is very different from this nuanced and sane way in which Luther speaks. Though Luther honoured the Scriptures more than any other human testimony to divine Truth, his understanding of the ineffability of that truth—that is, of the mysteries of God—prevented him from any kind of Biblicism.

(6) Faith as a dialogue with Doubt (contra Fideism or ‘true belief’. The sixth and (for now) final principle that seems to me to belong to classical Protestantism is its understanding of faith itself. Faith, in the Pauline understanding of it that was so important for the Reformers, is “not sight”: that is, it is trust in the absence of certitude, the kind of certitude that comes with sight. And faith is also not a permanent state, for trust can only actualize itself when it renews itself again and again in the face of all the evidence to the contrary. It is a living thing, this faith—just as living as the kind of trust that I have when I trust my partner in marriage, my friend, my lawyer, or whomsoever. It requires constant decision-making: may I trust this one, this God who promises to be “with us”? May I trust this Gospel of God’s gracious acceptance of me, when I know perfectly well how unacceptable I am, at bottom?

In other words, faith is a dialogue with doubt. Doubt is not a stranger to the faithful. ‘Lord, I believe, help my unbelief’—this is the prayer of true faith. Faith in which there is no doubt is dead faith, said Unamuno. And that, I believe, is an accurate representation of Reformation faith. Christians are not people who are all absolute certitude and no questions: they are people whose confidence in God is always being worked out in the heat of day-to-day living. They must always renew their trust, because their living is also characterized by a good deal of mistrust, both of God and their neighbours. It is as they confess their doubt that they are able to glimpse again the mysteries that brought them to faith.

This also means that they are able to have discourse with those who stand outside the house of faith. They are 'set apart' from the world, it is true; but they are also called to be ambassadors of Christ in the world; and they can only achieve that ambassadorial status if they are able to share, as human beings, the reasons why their worldly neighbours do not believe. The church exists in the world, not as a colony of pure believers, total believers, above all the others; it exists in the world as a community of those whose struggle of faith is also a struggle with worldly doubt. For that reason and that reason alone they are able to have discourse with their world. Doubt, therefore, though it is a negative quality, has a positive function. Without it, we could neither understand nor have communion with a doubting world.

To Conclude: I would never claim that these six principles or characteristics of classical Protestantism are the only features of Reformation faith that could be named; but I think that they are paramount. The stewarding of "the mysteries of God", for those who have kept in touch with these and other aspects of the great upheaval that was the 16th Century Reformation must mean risking making distinctions between what classical Protestantism means and the many forms of 'wider' Protestantism by which we are assailed in this culture. No matter how numerically powerful that wider Protestantism may be; no matter how singularly it may have captured the media; no matter how it may be courted by politicians and popular movements, the stewarding of the mysteries of God, for all who have caught some glimpse of the importance of Reformation thought, must mean the renewal of these teachings in congregation and, so far as possible, the culture at large.

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