

Introduction: Getting Clear on What You (Really) Believe

When I pick up a book, I wonder about the author: Who is she? What's her background? More importantly, I want to know: Why did he write this book? What does he have to tell me? What can I learn from him? Life is short, so I want to know these things up front. Presumably you do as well.

I'm writing this book because it seems that many Christians no longer know how to talk about their faith—at least not in an open, attractive, reflective, humble, inquiring, and truth-seeking way. It's not just that we don't know how to "witness"; we don't even know what we *ourselves* believe. I'm writing this book because I think that this is a very, very serious problem that needs to be addressed—now.

Maybe an anecdote will help you see what I mean. My last book, *Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, Divine Action* (Fortress Press, 2008), was published nine months ago, but I have yet to read any academic reviews of this work. That's because the world of academia grinds along slowly; it takes months for theologians to weigh in on new books and for major journals to start publishing reviews. But Pastor Bob Cornwall in Michigan is already blogging his way through my book. His thoughts, and my reactions, are being read by people across the country. In the new "space" of the Internet, people get to watch a theologian struggle over the criticisms of a parish pastor—in real time. When they have something to add, they click on "comment," and their thoughts instantly appear on the blog site next to mine. Author and readers are wrestling together, side by side, with the deep questions of our faith.

In a posting late last night, an auto mechanic in Idaho helped me learn something new about a school of thought called "process theology." I suddenly

realized that we're not just talking about process theology; this *is* theology in process! What we're doing is being the church; we're thinking out loud together about the core issues of our faith. The questions are owned not by professional theologians but by everyday Christians. For example, Pastor Bob continues to push me, week after week, with an exhortation no one ever gave me during years of doctoral studies in theology: "But will it preach?"

The Internet and other new technologies have democratized theology in a way that no one could have imagined just a generation ago. Here's the byproduct: rather than lowering the standards for solid theology, these folks are raising the bar! It is a whole lot more difficult for us professionals to do theology in this new public arena than it once was to write theology books for the scholars who used to formulate the objections that we thought we had to answer. This book argues that there are urgent Christian reasons to give theology back to the churches and to ordinary people—even if the word *theology* has to be radically transformed in the process.

Professional theologians are not trained to pay a lot of attention to what ordinary Christians think. We dialogue mostly with other theologians and academics (sort of like God listening only to the angels). Traditionally, theology has been modeled on a Greek and medieval understanding of God. At its most extreme, this leads to the belief that God could not interact with the world without compromising God's omnipotence. Not all theologians accept this heritage, of course. Process theologians, for example, understand God as being universally responsive. God is "the Supremely Related One," according to Marjorie Suchocki.¹ God receives the responses of absolutely

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every created individual at every moment and then responds back to each individual in the very next moment with a divine "lure," calling him or her, in turn, to a God-like response. I believe it was this understanding of God—as One who listens to all and responds with infinite love to all—that was in play last night in

the dialogue between a theologian, a Michigan pastor, and an auto mechanic from Idaho. Is this an improvement? You bet it is.

You can already tell that this is meant to be a radically democratic book. We need to stop delegating theology to specialists and return it to the people who need it, the people whose right (and responsibility) it is to "just do it." *Doing theology is just thinking about your faith.* Theology therefore belongs

to everyone who is drawn to Jesus and wants to figure out what it means to be identified with him in this immensely complex, twenty-first-century world. (It's also harder than the old kind of theology—you could just memorize that kind, but you have to think a bit when you do this kind.)

Actually, taking this step is more than a democratic move; it's a revolutionary move. Who knows what ordinary Christians might do if given permission to think deeply about what their faith implies for themselves, for their local churches, and for all the other roles that they play in society? I suspect that if we take an end run around academic theology and redefine theology to mean what ordinary believers think and talk about, some powerful things will happen. I *am* certain, however, that if we don't, academic theology by itself won't be enough to carry the future of the church. And the thought of a church without individuals who as disciples of Jesus think deeply about the burning issues of our day—about global warming and racism and science and religiously motivated warfare—is a frightening thought indeed.

Academic theology—the theology that's done in seminaries and divinity schools and academic journals—isn't going to help us rethink what “church” means in this radically new world. In fact, most academic theologians are hardly addressing the topic. How do I know? I know because until recently I was one of them. I specialized in the most abstract kinds of theology one can do: theist metaphysics, philosophical theology, and the theology-science dialogue. It was only recently, as the divorce between Church and Academy appears almost to be finalized, that I finally saw the foolishness of my ways.



A Prophetic Challenge to Academic Theology

My Damascus Road experience was initiated by two great church thinkers: Brian McLaren and John Cobb. Two of Brian's books in particular, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Zondervan, 2004) and *Everything Must Change* (Thomas Nelson, 2007), shook me to the core. In numerous publications and talks (many available as free downloads on iTunes), Brian has been calling theologians and church leaders to recognize that this is a major time of transition and to take steps to lead the church through it. He argues—rightly—that this unique time places a special obligation on theologians to be “passionately devoted to truth.”²

I think Brian is exactly on track. Professional theologians, including me, have needed to hear this call for a long, long while, and it's time for us to

take it fully to heart. Yet many of us remain hesitant to do so. Why? In part it's because theologians are trained in the classical languages and time-worn academic debates. Asking us to begin writing short, accessible blogs and to post videos on YouTube feels like asking us to step out of the boat and walk on water. It is frightening new territory for professional theologians trained to write careful academic prose. Unfortunately, the complexity of our language (of which I was once so proud!) means that we have enormous difficulty in communicating clearly with and for the church.

In the end, it was the visionary thinker John Cobb who played the decisive role in my conversion away from purely academic theology. John calls the church to renewal and transformation in an amazing book that should be required reading for all theology students (as it is now for mine) and church people alike: *Reclaiming the Church: Where the Mainline Church Went Wrong and What to Do about It*. In it, John argues that the chief obstacle to renewal and transformation in churches today is “the inability of the church to think theologically.”³ His words are nothing short of prophetic: “There is . . . a lack of a shared sense of the primary importance of that to which the church witnesses. As long as this sense is lacking, the church cannot convincingly call for primary commitment or loyalty. It must inevitably settle for third, fourth, fifth, or sixth place in the priority system of most of its members” (8).

There are many causes for this malaise, but John contends that the main problem is *the professionalization of theology*: “The problem lies in the gap now existing between theology and church life, a gap that did not exist to any comparable extent a century ago” (23). The result is tragic: “Lay people and pastors do not understand themselves as responsible to think as Christians” (23). The primary responsibility for Christian thought now belongs to professors who teach in seminaries and divinity schools. For some centuries this worked, because theologians like me wrote books that helped clarify the mission of the church, books that guided thinking Christians and church leaders, books that provided material for pastors as they prepared sermons and sought to bring the word of God to life anew for their congregations. But over the last fifty years or so things began to change. Theology evolved into another academic discipline, pursued according to academic standards and aimed at a largely academic audience. The upshot was predictable. According to John Cobb, “There is a tendency for seminary professors of theology to take less responsibility for the ongoing development of theology. It suffices

to be a good student and critic of theology, who can pass on to one's students a critical understanding of what theologians have said" (27).

Here's the problem: academic theologians, like me, are responsible for preparing candidates for ordination and for giving them the tools they need to pastor for the rest of their lives. If what we teach them is irrelevant to ministry in the real world, what will they do upon leaving seminary? As Cobb notes, they will "[fall] back on the popular notions they brought with them to seminary, only now knowing that these could not be taken seriously as 'theology'" (26). Ill-prepared to make connections between academic theology and faith in daily life, clergypersons often resort to offering combinations of native biblical understanding, pop psychology, and readings of "the signs of the times." In short, not only have seminaries not prepared future ministers well, but we also have unintentionally taken away from them the right to call whatever they *do* come up with "theology." We have not only failed to teach them to speak; we have cut out their tongues as well! The results can only be disastrous for the church as a whole: "Unless the Christian faith can provide the basis for assimilating the truth of the new challenges of the 20th century into a whole that is communicable to many, and unless Christians can point convincingly to what this new vision requires, oldline Protestantism will relapse more and more into lukewarmness—and death" (12f).



Toward the Rebirth of Theology

John Cobb's words have convicted me as strongly as anything in my life as a Christian. Reviewing what I was teaching to first-year seminary students, I realized I was still unconsciously teaching to standards internalized during my doctoral work. I was subjecting these future ministers to complex distinctions drawn from the history of theology or contemporary philosophy, but I was not showing them how these distinctions are relevant to today's world—if they even are! Most theologians leave ministry questions to instructors in the "arts of ministry"—preaching, pastoral counseling, worship, church administration, and the like. But that's just wrong. It's *my* responsibility as a theologian to help draw connections to the life of the church, and this responsibility cannot be shunted off on others.

For me, personally, the first step to "transforming Christian theology" was to change the way I teach. I now require my ministry students to develop

a personal Credo—a statement of what they really believe—in response to the core questions of the Christian faith: Who is God? Who is Jesus? What is salvation? What is church? These detailed documents reflect their call to ministry, their understanding of the Scriptures, and the context in which they anticipate they will be ministering. I still introduce students to a variety of approaches to theology, of course, but now the goal is to help them glean insights from others about how to better articulate *their own* responses to the core questions of faith. Jesus asked of his disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” (Mt. 16:15). No one who has a call to Christian ministry gets to walk away from class without answering that question.

The second step in my transformation is to walk the talk, which means that I must also change how *I* communicate my reflections on Christian belief and identity. I can no longer publish theology books that are written primarily for specialists. From now on I must write for a broader audience, one that includes ordinary people who are eager to speak clearly and passionately of their faith—and those who are struggling to find out exactly what in the Christian story they really do care passionately about. In this regard, my last book represents the end of one era for me, and this book heralds the beginning of the next.⁴ Perhaps this will irritate academic theologians and there may be backlash. But, as I’ve argued, the urgency of the situation calls for some pretty radical responses. We can’t afford “business as usual” any longer.

The third and final step in my process of repentance is to become active in bringing about a sea change among academic theologians. With a grant from the Ford Foundation to “rekindle theological imagination,” Marjorie Suchocki and I assembled a group of thirty leading theologians to talk about the problems and to look for ways professional theologians might do our work better so that it will have transformative influence on church and society. Two months later we invited thirty denominational leaders and leaders from the National Council of Churches to do the same. This book is an attempt to share with you the first results of what we are learning. We want to break the monopoly academic theologians have had on theology and to return serious Christian reflection to all who are drawn to walk the Way of Jesus. To change things, we have to understand why so many people have lost the ability to give powerful, vibrant accounts of what it means to be “Christian” in today’s world and what it is they actually believe.

Many people are doing great stuff in congregations and in social ministries, and we should celebrate their work. But our *accounts* of what we're doing, and why we do it, often wouldn't earn a "pass" from my junior high Sunday school teacher. (Okay, she was pretty tough.) Christian action is alive and well in mainline churches, but Christian self-descriptions are in crisis. We have trouble talking about what is *uniquely Christian* about our lifestyles and ministries, and our inability is crippling those ministries. Laryngitis has attacked our vocal cords. This book is a call to give the church back its tongue, to help everyday Christians find their voices again.

Imagine what will happen when pew-sitting Christians and those who have gradually drifted away from the institutional church—together with pastors, denominational leaders, and directors of social justice ministries—begin to share their personal faith stories and talk openly and passionately about their faith journeys. Imagine a church where every member is thinking deeply about the core Christian questions in light of our contemporary world. Imagine congregations where everyone can address the hot-button issues of our day out of the deepest resources of the Christian tradition—perhaps haltingly, perhaps with some radically new types of answers, but still with humility and deep reflection. That's the goal of the Transforming Theology movement, of which this book is one expression.

Perhaps you're worried that if Christians start to talk about what they really believe, they'll begin splintering the church, and all hell will break loose (figuratively speaking). So I'm going to work equally hard in the coming pages to describe a *way* for folks to talk systematically about what they believe—that is, to begin doing theology—that is not dogmatic, divisive, or relativistic. I'll list the reasons why I think our culture is now undergoing a major paradigm shift that is opening up new ways of believing and talking. And I'll say why I think this is really good news for individual disciples, for the church, and for new modes of transformative Christian activism in society and in the world at large.

You may not associate doing theology with being revolutionary now, but by the time you've finished this book, I hope you will have changed your mind.