

Eight Easy Steps to Theological Maturity

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All three of the topics I was asked to address begin with “The Challenge of. . .” How many different kinds of challenges are there? We are told to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength. That may be a good place to begin to think of challenges. Some challenges will seem especially to engage our hearts, others our minds, still others our souls. Some challenges may test our strength, which I think means more than sheer physical muscle and exertion.

Let me begin by suggesting a few things a challenge is not. For one thing, it is not our being called to overcome the hostilities of fate. Christian theologians in the Wesleyan tradition are trained to believe in the ultimate goodness of God. There may be momentary setbacks, even monumental struggles. But we must continue to believe that God intends *good* for us, even though our immediate circumstances of life seem to suggest God has forsaken us.

Fate is the ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus. He was condemned to roll a gigantic stone up a hill. That was bad enough, but every time he had nearly reached the top of the hill, the stone rolled back to the bottom. Sisyphus had to start all over again, at the bottom of the hill. That was his lot in life: always to roll the stone up the hill, but never to succeed.

Another thing a challenge is not is an end in itself. We have all heard the recitations of the physical accomplishments of John Wesley, that he rode 250,000 miles on horseback and preached however many thousands of sermons and wrote or published hundreds of books and pamphlets. But these stupendous accomplishments are not ends in themselves, not even ends for the particular life of John Wesley. They are ends as they meet in God and God’s kingdom. In other words, Wesley did not do all of these things for himself, but for the greater glory of God.

Becoming a theologian is not about earning academic degrees, joining theological societies or writing books and articles. To a certain extent, these steps and procedures are necessary, but one could accomplish all of this and still in my opinion not be a theologian.

Karl Barth is for some people the greatest Protestant theologian since the Reformation, and most would name him at least the greatest of the 20th century. Barth had a theological education, yet never completed a doctorate, never even started one so far as I know. He was formed theologically by what he saw and experienced at least as much as what he read and heard in theological classrooms. His eleven-year pastorate at Safenwil, Switzerland, juxtaposed with the horrors of World War One, convinced him of the bankruptcy of theological and cultural liberalism. He was later dismayed when some of his own theological teachers joined the National Socialist party in Germany. During World War Two he opposed the Third Reich. He believed in theological activism, that one’s theological studies should lead directly to action.

What are the eight steps to theological maturity? Some of these steps are probably more theoretical, others more practical. Some may touch more on being than on doing. In God, of course, there can never be any sort of gap between theory and practice, or between being and doing. That is one of the realities that makes God God: only of the Triune God can we say that being perfectly corresponds to itself, that being and doing are perfectly joined together, that form and function are one. For the rest of us, we strive to become through grace who God is by nature. In fact that is a good definition of holiness, which arises out of Eastern Orthodox theology: the holy life is to become

by grace who God is by nature. Throughout what the Orthodox call *theosis* or deification, there is never any thought of our becoming God by nature. Only God is God. Yet through grace we can and must become sharers in God's very life.

First Step: *Become a Theologian of Culture.* This idea comes mostly from Paul Tillich, one of the greatest theologians of culture of the twentieth century. For Tillich, a theological life was to be lived within what he called the theological circle. The circumference or boundaries of the circle were determined by what is perhaps Tillich's most famous phrase, "ultimate concern." When you have found what concerns you ultimately, or perhaps better stated when it has found you, you have found your theological circle. Life within the theological circle was marked by the claims that your ultimate concern made upon you, although because each of us is a finite sinner, life within the theological circle was for Tillich always one that was torn between faith and doubt, the infinite and the finite. Karl Barth disagreed with Tillich at the point of thinking that doubt was inevitable in the living of the theological life. Barth believed that doubt was a sin, but Tillich felt that it was not possible to live without doubt. Doubt is part of the existential condition of life, even theological life.

I obviously did not travel halfway around the world to encourage all of us to practice being doubters!! I would say, perhaps as an aside, that this is one of the areas that separate the Lutheran view of holiness from the Wesleyan. Lutherans, and probably Calvinists also, seemingly doubt that they could ever be really and wholly and intrinsically righteous. They would much rather say that their righteousness is altogether in Jesus Christ, and not at all in themselves. Wesleyans certainly believe that our righteousness is altogether in Jesus Christ, and yet we further believe that through the miracle of grace and the infused love of the Holy Spirit, the righteousness of Jesus Christ is made available to us personally.

The debate between alien or positional righteousness and actual and imparted righteousness became focused in Wesley's day in the parable of the Wedding Garment. Calvinists of that time believed that the Wedding Garment spoken of in the gospels was only positional holiness. Take the wedding garment off, and what remains after it is removed is only a mass of sin and perdition. The image of putting on and taking off a garment is probably not the best or most revealing image. We all remove jackets and shirts and coats without thinking about what we are doing. But some of you come from places where ceremonial dress is very important. Certain times and seasons of life—birth, maturity, death—may be accompanied by the wearing of ceremonial dress. The symbol of the wedding garment can remain a powerful symbol in such cultures.

To become a theologian of culture is to look at culture theologically. Since theology is the study of God, to look at culture theologically is ideally to look at culture through the eyes of God. For most evangelical Christians around the world, to look at culture is first of all to see it as fallen from the grace of God. Evangelicals have always been great at pointing out the sin of the world. We should not be naïve. The world is a sinful place. But we should not be hopeless either.

The horrors of three commercial airliners crashing into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon are still too fresh for us to be able to say very much about these events theologically. We need a longer perspective than one month can give us.

But I would say that almost immediately after these tragic events the wheels of divine providence started to turn mightily. Signs of moral and spiritual renewal erupted everywhere. Augustine's belief that God allows evil in order to turn evil into good was very much proven.

To become a theologian of culture is especially to practice the gift of discernment. It is to see which groups and forces within the culture control and interpret the symbols of the country. It is also of course to discern forces and currents that unite or divide any given country, or an entire region. For example, do secularization and modernization always accompany each other? As developing nations

across this region continue to develop, will they at the same time lose their traditional spiritual sensibilities and understandings? Is it easier to proclaim the doctrine of holiness to someone fully secularized, whose real gods are wealth and technology, or to someone still respectful of the spiritual traditions of that country, even if the traditions are not Christian?

A true theologian of culture is not only interested in subjecting the culture to a deep theological analysis. A Christian analysis of any culture goes on from there to attempt to transform the culture. Remember that in H. Richard Niebuhr's famous book *Christ and Culture*, he mentioned John Wesley as an example of how Christ can transform culture. I believe that is one gift the Church of the Nazarene can give to the world, to put forth an authentically Wesleyan analysis of culture. In some ways Wesleyan theology is uniquely poised to do this. We have theological relations with virtually the entire spectrum of Christian theology, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and many kinds of Protestantism. This breadth of interest can, I believe, be traced all the way back to Wesley himself.

Second Step: *Construct a Theological Autobiography.* This is not the same as an account of how you became a Christian, although some of those details will be relevant. A theological autobiography will help you to take your own theological pulse. You will have a better idea of how you have arrived where you currently find yourself, where you have already been, and where through God's grace you hope to go.

A theological autobiography could take many forms. Simply sitting down one afternoon at a writing desk or computer and discussing influential books, favorite Scriptures, powerful teachers, helpful conferences and so on would be a traditional if somewhat boring way to do this. There might be better ways to accomplish the same ideal.

A theological autobiography is simply to look at your entire life through a theological lens. A theological lens should probably first of all look for *kairotic* moments, times of *kairos* in your life. Birth, travel, family, marriage, conversion, parenthood, education, major illnesses and restoration of health are all times of *kairos* for all of us. There are moments when God the Holy Spirit has shone with particular brilliance in our lives.

Many great theologians have reflected autobiographically. In the case of some of them, key events in their lives have been studied over and over again, for example what happened to Martin Luther in the tower, and John Wesley's heart being strangely warmed along Aldersgate Street. Augustine was traumatized by stealing pears as a youth, an event he reports in his *Confessions*. Closer to our time, Paul Tillich was a Lutheran chaplain in World War I. During those war years he not only saw the horrors of trench warfare, but also purchased cheap reproductions of famous paintings in military stores. Thus did he begin to become a theologian of culture. Jurgen Moltmann became a theologian in response to having been a prisoner of war during World War II.

Luther once said something like this: There is no place so big, God is not bigger. There is no place so small, God is not smaller. To me this says that God wants to meet us everywhere we go, in whatever we do. Every time of our lives can be a time of theological pondering.

I told David Phillips, Nazarene missionary in the Philippines, that I am preaching every Sunday morning at a small United Methodist church in northeast Oklahoma. He responded by saying I need to learn to ride horses, hunt, and fish to identify really and truly with the people of that area. He is probably correct in saying this. All of us need to try new things, or remember old things we have forgotten, so that we can grow as Christian theologians and as ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Remember Paul's hope of becoming all things to all people, so he could win as many people to the cause of the cross as possible.

If we construct a theological autobiography, I hope we will see God and not ourselves at the center of our universe. If we do, we are well along the way to the **Third Step** to theological maturity:

Look Upon the Whole World as Our Parish.

Few of us will have very many opportunities to travel around the world and live in different parts of the world. Few of us will be as fortunate as Wilfredo and Lourdes Manaois, who have spent significant time in three world areas: the Philippines, Africa, and the United States.

If we cannot always take ourselves to the world, we can try to bring the world to us. The easy way would be, I suppose, to read books and articles, listen to music, and watch videos about world cultures that are of interest to you and yet largely unfamiliar to you. A slightly more adventurous plan would be to eat in ethnic restaurants or to shop in stores selling merchandise not from your place. The best way, of course, is actually to meet people from different world areas. Meet them not on your terms, but allow them to reveal themselves to you on their terms. This will admittedly take some time. For some of us, it may take a lifetime, and still we will have only begun.

I heard a lot about Filipino hospitality when I arrived in the Philippines, and continued to hear about it as I continued to live there. I believe that Filipino hospitality is better than Western hospitality. Western style hospitality typically cares for the physical needs of the weary traveler. Western hospitality feeds, cleans, and gives rest to someone and then is typically done with that person.

Filipino hospitality is more about creating space where a person can be free to be himself. God is a God of hospitality in that sense also. The Triune God, who has space within for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to indwell each other in the way of *perichoresis*, is big enough to allow us to be ourselves. The great Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson has written that “God makes narrative room in his triune life for others than himself. . . . God opens otherness between himself and us, and so there is present room for us.”

Filipinos in particular, and Asians as a whole, open up the space necessary to become a self. Filipino hospitality may or may not invite a foreigner or stranger over to dinner. Sometimes I was invited over to eat, and sometimes not. But Filipino hospitality *frees one to become oneself*, and that is the greatest hospitality of all, because it mirrors the hospitality we find in God himself.

This divine hospitality helps us to view the whole world as our parish. All of the words in this declaration are significant. God wishes us to see the *whole*, to see with eyes of faith, to see with the eyes of God. The whole is always more than just adding up all of the parts. The whole adds a dimension that is not fully present in any of the parts.

It is the *world* we are to look upon as a *whole*. At the outset, at least, it may be helpful to look upon the entire world as being recreated in God’s image. Perhaps we should first see the whole sweep of God’s grace, covering all of the world, and only after seeing grace should we look for places where people have refused grace. I am confident that this is the way God sees the world.

The whole world is *our* parish. I think John Wesley said the whole world is *my* parish, and to say “my parish” may add responsibility and urgency to the calling each of us senses from the Lord. If God has assigned this particular responsibility to *me*, it may not get done if I do not accomplish it.

But to say “our parish” sounds to me, at least, to be more appropriate for this part of the world. There is strength in numbers. Our primary path to theological maturity should be as surrounded by a cloud of witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and only secondarily as isolated pilgrims.

To say “our parish” instead of “my parish” may further remind us that as theologians and ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ we work together with students and members of our churches. Knowing our students and knowing the people in our churches is essential to knowing what sort of work God wants us to do in our parish, for after all it is not our parish but really the Lord’s.

If to say “whole world” is huge, to say “parish” localizes it. Each of us has come here from a local parish. We must never forget where we have come from. We can never really contextualize any

part of theology without learning as much as we can about our local circumstances.

Fourth Step: *Practice the Art of Spiritual Geography.* By that I simply mean that we must be aware of the holiness of God wherever we live, or to put it in other words, the physical surroundings of where we are will inevitably color and shape our spiritual perceptions.

The psalmist looked to the hills. The psalmist also walked beside still waters and laid down in green pastures. The whole earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof. To practice the art of spiritual geography is to understand more and more that the gap between the physical and the spiritual is perhaps not as large as we have imagined. We have already mentioned that the Asian world view is more cosmic than the Western. The art of spiritual geography will narrow the gap between the physical and the spiritual.

It is simply not possible to ask "Does God get wet in the monsoon?" outside of the tropical lands where the monsoon blows. I did not realize until I had left my native state of Oregon what a great gift it had given to me, and continues to give to me. Non-Oregonians can never appreciate Oregon's warm gray winters and overcast summer mornings. The Pacific Ocean, the Willamette Valley, and the Cascade mountain range are forever a part of me.

To practice the art of spiritual geography is finally to know our home. We can never know our own hearts unless we know our home. We can never be effective workers in the Lord's vineyard unless we know both our hearts and our homes. To know either one of these two is necessarily to know the other.

Sometimes it may take an entire lifetime to find one's true heart. We have learned to speak of the instant of crisis and the moment of surrender when speaking of how one becomes entirely sanctified. In speaking in this way, we remind ourselves that the Holy Spirit is able to work thoroughly, quickly, and immediately.

Yet sometimes the Holy Spirit seems to be slow in his workings with people, perhaps because people are slow to respond. Some conversions are agonizingly slow. Jaroslav Pelikan spent virtually his entire professional life as an historical theologian in the Lutheran tradition. But at age seventy or so he converted to Eastern Orthodoxy, and remains to this day.

Filipinos have a charming expression: *my place* or *your place*. Here I think place means about what Americans mean by home. Americans do say "there's no place like home," which perhaps captures the best insights from both cultures. Filipino men who squat by the side of the road take the full measure of their place.

T.S. Eliot has written:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
(“Little Gidding” in *The Four Quartets*)

A place becomes home when it supports a community. Through the Exodus the captive Israelites became a nation. They inherited the promised land. Moses helped bring a nation to birth. Through Moses God formed a nation, but through Jacob God named a people. The people had first to be named, before they could be formed as a nation. In Genesis 32 Jacob wrestles and contends all night long with an unknown man. As the day is breaking and each man's energy is long since spent, the stranger begs to be released from Jacob's hold. Jacob refuses to release him without receiving a blessing from him. "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no

longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”

Fifth Step: *Do Not Be Afraid to Argue With God.* Do not be afraid to argue with God, for you may win. Jacob prevailed against God, and because Jacob prevailed, his name was changed from Jacob to Israel.

Jacob limps away from his all-night wrestling match. The man he contended with struck Jacob on his hip socket, pushing his hip out of joint. Jacob’s prevailing against God is not the defeat of God but the victory of Jacob. “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved,” Jacob confesses. He did not expect to be spared, but he was.

To see God face to face is one definition of what holiness means. In the case of Jacob, he survived this encounter, and in his survival he named an entire people. The whole event illustrates what Hannah later prayed, in 1 Samuel 2:6, “The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.” Through his night of wrestling the Lord was killing Jacob and turning him into Israel. When morning came and Jacob realized his life was preserved, the struggle had named a people.

Those who have gone before us in the holiness movement have striven with God and have won. They have been killed by the Lord and they have been brought to life by the Lord.

Sixth and Seventh Steps: *Speak the Truth in Love* and *Never Lose Your Theological Voice.* “Speak the Truth in Love” (Ephesians 4:15) is the sixth step and “Never Lose Your Theological Voice” is the seventh step.

To *speak* the truth is an activist approach to truth. Truth is truth not simply as thought, because it must also be spoken. The Christian cannot be content merely to speak the truth, if the truth is not spoken in love. The Christian and the theologian must speak the truth in love.

If one truly speaks the truth in love, one will never lose one’s theological voice. Others may try to steal or suppress your theological voice, but if you speak the truth in love your theological voice will sound forth with great clarity, truth, and depth.

The Taiwanese Presbyterian theologian C.S. Song has often advised Christians in Asia to theologize using Asian resources. He endorses using Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist, Shinto, and Confucianist resources in a way that we cannot. Or to put it more exactly, C.S. Song advocates adopting such ancient Asian resources uncritically, whereas we must use them critically, sparingly, even prophetically. We may be able to use the vessel, the form of the story, if not all of its contents.

This may be true of the Buddhist idea of nirvana, which means extinction or emptiness. It is of course often said that Buddhism is a religion of emptiness, absence, even nihilism. By contrast, Christianity is said to be a religion of fullness, presence, and confidence. Yet there are elements of emptiness in our Christian faith. Even in our holiness language we seek to imitate the *kenosis* of Jesus Christ in “dying daily” and “being crucified with Christ.”

We all need to learn much more about Eastern or at least non-Western philosophies and approaches to reality than we currently know. We too easily dismiss our relative ignorance by the fear of syncretism. We fear that the more we know about, for example, Buddhism, the less we will know about Christianity. Yet I am convinced that my limited studies into Buddhism have made me a better Christian theologian. If I lived in a country where Buddhism had decisively shaped my nation’s history and culture, I would feel obligated to learn a great deal about it.

At a minimum we must encourage everyone here to look more seriously at the long and rich history of Christianity in Asia. Christianity does not begin in Asia with the arrival of the Protestant missionaries, and not even with the Roman Catholic missionaries who came before them. There is a viable historical tradition that one of the apostles founded Christianity in India. So your Christian history is as old as that of anyone. Realize the richness of your tradition, learn about it, grow with it.

The American holiness movement has recently been looking at itself, and has realized that its

own tradition reaches back to apostolic Christianity. No longer is it thought that the doctrine of holiness was taught in the New Testament, and then not again until John Wesley arrived on the scene in the eighteenth century. Early Christian spirituality, medieval Roman Catholicism, and Reformation piety must now all be taken into account.

At the centennial of the 1898 independence of the Philippines one newspaper writer said that freedom denied is not freedom extinguished. Soon after the 1898 declaration of freedom the Philippines was once again under foreign domination, first by the Americans and, during World War 2, by the Japanese. But throughout this near half-century, freedom was not extinguished or obliterated, only denied and subverted.

Every theologian develops his or her distinctive theological voice in full recognition of heritage and history. It must be the same with all of us.

Eighth Step: *Receive Your Theological Voice From the Holy Spirit.* With mortals, this is impossible. With God, all things are possible! The Holy Spirit, the bond of love between God the Father and God the Son, is the only one who can really give us a theological voice. In Trinitarian theology, we might say there is a perfect three-part harmony voiced by Father, Son, and Spirit. The Triune God sings not three songs, but one song. Because we are mortals and not God, our harmonies will not be the perfect harmony of the Triune God. But all of our voices can aim at one thing, at glorifying God. And if our voices take seriously the triune dynamic of the many expressing themselves as the one, we will have found our theological voice and voices, and we will speak it and them in love.