



Growing Up Theologically
by Leanne Van Dyk

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INTRODUCTION

There is a pervasive impression within the church that theology is distant from the life of faith, needlessly abstract, and intentionally confusing. This impression is not confined to church members, but is also found among the church's ministers. Beyond the ivy covered walls of the academy, Christians are often bewildered by theological terminology, puzzled by abstract theological arguments, and indifferent to current theological fashions.

Authentic theology is not abstruse academic work that is divorced from the real life of the church. At its heart, theology is the fulfillment of the whole church's calling to reflect upon its faith and mission so that it may serve its Lord in faithful obedience. Yet the shape of the church's theological vocation is uncertain. The academic model—professors and classes, books and term papers, exams and degrees—does not translate well into the congregation. Church members are unlikely to become informal 'degree candidates' and ministers are unlikely to continue the graduate student life. How can ministers and members alike imagine a theological vocation that is not bound to a scholastic model?

In *Theology and Worship Occasional Paper No. 15*, Leanne Van Dyk develops a lively metaphor for thinking theologically. *Growing Up Theologically* spins out the process of organic growth as an imaginative way of understanding ourselves as people who can and do reflect on Christian faith and life, and who can mature in our theological thinking.

Growing Up Theologically was originally an address given at the "Company of Pastors" luncheon at the 2001 General Assembly meeting in Louisville. The appreciative response of those who attended the luncheon prompted the Office of Theology and Worship to make Leanne Van Dyk's address available to a wider audience.

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The Office of Theology and Worship hopes that *Growing Up Theologically* will be a suggestive resource for pastors, educators, sessions, and others as we seek to be faithful to God and to the body of Christ.

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and Worship

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Growing Up Theologically

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll tells the story of the trial of the Knave, who had been arrested for stealing the tarts. The trial was immediately thrown into confusion when the King of Hearts asked the jury to render their verdict before any evidence had been presented. The prosecuting attorney, the White Rabbit, holding a letter supposedly written by the Knave, asked the King in some frustration, "Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?" The King replied, "Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end, then stop."

Is this what we do when we think theologically? Do we start at the beginning and go on till we come to the end and then stop? It is a tempting image. It seems simple and clean. But we all know that thorny questions immediately arise. What is the beginning? Is it God's disruptive grace or human subjectivity? And how do we go on till we come to the end? How can we tell when it is the end? And should we stop or is theology a perennial call of the church? The instructions of the King of Hearts seem, at first, quite inadequate.

Yet, there is something about the idea of process—of a beginning, a middle, and an end—that is suggestive when we think about theology. I am going to propose that we investigate the possibility that thinking theologically is something like the King's instruction to the White Rabbit. First, I'd like to clarify that, for our purposes, I understand "end" in a teleological sense. It represents a fullness, a completion, a goal, rather than a temporal ending point. Furthermore, I suggest that we imagine the process of thinking theologically in terms of life development: as a conception, a gestation, a birth, a childhood, and a maturity. Perhaps the image of life, from its very beginning to its full completion, is a usable image to understand the many things we do when we think theologically.

This metaphor for thinking theologically is somewhat risky. To suggest that theological thinking is analogous to the way a baby grows *in utero*, then is born, then toddles, talks, walks, and finally achieves full adult may make some people scoff. "No, that's not what thinking theologically is like," they might say, "thinking theologically has its methods, its presuppositions, and its rationality. It is a unique science. It is not like a biological organism. This just confuses the discussion." Others may be uncomfortable with the one-directional implications of my metaphor. Organic growth implies, well, growth. There is a certain inevitability to it. This can't be like theological thinking, which tends to have starts and stops, backtracking and correction, even silence, darkness, and lament. Others may note that my image has suspicious similarities to Kohlberg's stages of moral development, a theory that has been much criticized not only for its inadequacy but also its presuppositions against faith.

While acknowledging all these objections, let us spin out this image of organic growth. There is something helpful in suggesting that thinking theologically is, in some way, like the facts of life. This is so for three reasons. First, it is an image that highlights the creative and gracious action of God – the miracle of how it is we can even think and speak of God. Second, it is an image that highlights the utterly human character of thinking theologically. Third, it is an image that suggests a dynamic, not a static notion of theology. Thinking theologically is like conception, gestation, birth, childhood, and maturity. Better yet, thinking theologically is like *being* conceived, gestating, *being* born, *being* a child, and then growing into maturity. Let me explain each stage.

CONCEPTION Doing theology is, first of all, like being conceived. This is the realm of God's gracious initiative. We can only put into words who God is, what God has done for us and our salvation as an act of response to God's initiative. Our knowledge *about* God follows our knowledge *of* God.

Emphasizing divine initiative is, of course, a typically

Reformed thing to do. You would expect me to say this, since I am a Reformed theologian. Some people think this starting point is somewhat naive. . . a bit of wishful thinking. They rightly point out that any human cognition, affect, or action has an unavoidable contextual matrix. The starting point according to this view is human self-awareness and responsibility. That's where theology starts.

I'm very sympathetic to vigorous reminders of the contextual nature of theology, as you will see. But here, in thinking about our being *conceived* into theology, I'm making another typical Reformed claim – that all life, from the sub-atomic to the cosmic, is a gift of God. I'm making the claim that the human abilities to speak, to love, to create, to sing, to dance, to think about God, to wonder about God, to speak about God are all gifts of God. A strong affirmation of Reformed theology states that all good gifts come from God. There are times, I suppose, when we wonder if the ability to think theologically is a good gift, especially when some of us become mired in the politics of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). But surely thinking theologically is a good gift and it comes, as do all good gifts, from God. The *conception* of our theological speech is, ultimately, a divine gracious act.

GESTATION What, then, is the *gestation* of theological thinking? What is it that both protects and nourishes theological language? Some might say that it is clear thinking, or the classic Christian tradition which nourishes and protects theological language. Maybe a Master of Divinity degree accomplishes this? I suggest, however, that it is *worship*. Thinking theologically *gestates* in worship. This is a theme that is attracting growing attention both in congregations and seminaries as the conversation widens on the integration of theology and worship. The thesis is simple: Theology deeply implicates worship. Worship deeply implicates theology.

My colleague at Western Seminary, David Stubbs, recently gave a public lecture entitled *Liturgy as Ethics*. He suggested that

the liturgy of the worshiping community has both obvious and rich theological implications. Is there a confession of sin and the assurance of pardon in the worship liturgy? If so, this makes a theological point. If not, this makes a theological point. Is the Lord's Supper celebrated in ways that signal the community's glad acceptance of God's invitation to the feast? Is baptism celebrated in such a way that it is clear to the community that this is a sacrament which marks Christian identity, celebrates God's faithfulness and hospitality, and calls the congregation to live life as the community of the baptized?

These are the sorts of questions that pastors who wish to gestate their congregation's theology in worship will ask. They are also the sorts of questions that pastors and worship committees need to ask who wish to plan theologically rich, biblically honest, and ethically fruitful worship services. Might the various armies in the worship wars come to peace talks if they realize that worship is laden with implicit and explicit statements about God? What is the theological difference between a worship leader who bounds to the front of the church with a hearty "Good Morning!" and a worship leader who speaks the classic words of the *Votum*, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth"? What is the *theological* difference. . .not the stylistic difference or ethos difference or personal preference difference, but the *theological* difference? This is the fundamental question which must shape our worship practices. Worship gestates theology. Our theology is protected and nourished in the worship of the community.

BIRTH The *birth* of theological thinking is *into* the community. Only in community is theological thinking possible. No formative theologies have been written in isolation. Think of your favorites. . .the classic sources of Augustine, Hildegard, Calvin, Schleiermacher, Barth, Niebuhr. . .or the contemporary voices of Placher, LaCugna, Moltmann, and many, many more. Whether they are aware of it or not, they all represent a community. I suggest that theology that is aware of its communal context is the more authentic, honest, and cheerful theology.

Leanne Van Dyk

Now, why is the birth of theology into the community? One reason is that human life is irreducibly contextual. This affects everything, including theology. I admit that this insight about the contextual, communal nature of theology is one that I quickly understood, but only slowly have I seen its very deep implications.

Let me give an example. A group of us were discussing some of these issues at a recent meeting of theological educators. We were reflecting on the now familiar fact that, for some people, the doctrine of the atonement seems like very bad news – that God would, for the sake of the world, require the death of the beloved Son. This deep biblical paradox of the cross is profoundly repugnant to some. Yet it is just as profoundly liberating to others. And it's not always easy to predict what the response will be. Some privileged, educated women theologians in North America, for instance, recoil against traditionally stated atonement theories. Yet, they have not been the victims of horrendous social crises such as war, famine, torture or displacement. Women theologians in Uganda, however, report that traditionally stated atonement theories are deeply liberating. Such language, for them, is good news. Here is just one example of the thoroughly contextual nature of theological language.

It is not very helpful, then, for one context to say to another context, "Your way of stating this central Christian claim is not right. My way of stating it is right." Instead, it is helpful to realize that the same statement of a doctrine can be damaging in one context and liberating in another – and not always along lines that we might think. It is helpful to realize that doctrine not only *can* be stated variously according to context, but also *must* be stated variously according to context. This is so for the sake of the proclamation of the gospel and the transformation of people and

Let me be clear. I am speaking here only about theological *language*. I affirm that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, communities.

and forever. But human speech with respect to Jesus Christ is contextual. This means that theology is never finished, never done. It is always new, called forth from us in the contexts where we minister.

Another reason why the birth of theology is into the community is because the life we share together as people of God is a reflection of the inner life of God, the Trinitarian life of God. Our identity as the church is an identity which properly ought to mirror the very life of God. We think theologically in community because it is in community that we most authentically imitate God. We are created *imago Dei*, but communally we are *imago Trinitatis*, or so we should be. This theological affirmation has implications for every single relationship we can name. In his *Invitation to Theology*, Michael Jinkins says, "All of the relationships of ordinary life are shot through with eternal significance, and theology is the discipline through which we attempt to discern and map this reality."¹

The birth of theological thought and speech into the community, then, means both the community of believers—the church—in all its contextuality and particularity, and the communion of the Triune God, with all the implications that follow concerning human relationships. Theologians such as Catherine LaCugna, Jurgen Moltmann, Leonardo Boff and others spell out these implications in human relationships from marriage to structures of politics and economics, relationships that follow patterns of mutuality and reciprocity instead of domination and oppression. Catherine LaCugna, for example, is aware that it is in our life *together* before this Triune God that we can actually know and understand God. She says, "The heart of the Christian life is the encounter with a personal God who makes possible both our union with God and communion with each other."²

CHILDHOOD What would the *childhood* of theological thinking be? As we follow our metaphor of the development of life, a cluster of themes comes to mind. Perhaps the childhood of

theology would be the errors, falseness, and pride that sometime characterize our theology. In this respect, the image requires us to grow up, to correct immature and foolish attitudes, to discipline our temper tantrums and control our desire to be king of the hill. This is one cluster of images that come to mind.

In another way, however, theological thinking as a childhood state is to be celebrated and treasured, not disciplined and corrected. I'm thinking of the joy, the exuberance, the imagination, and the wonder of children. We must always, in some ways, be just like children in our theology.

In the lovely children's story, *Anne of Green Gables*, the spirited young orphan girl of the story is thoroughly disappointed with her red hair. She is convinced it is a tragic fate. She has given up praying because of her red hair. She explained, "Ever since the orphanage mistress told me my red hair came from God, I decided I didn't care much for God anymore." Here is a theological statement utterly transparent in its lament. Of course it's naïve and childish, but it is honest, blunt, and closer to the tradition of lament psalms than rationalist theodicies. A childlike instinct is extremely important for our theological thinking.

Barth often warned against theology being too serious. He insisted that theological thinking must be like play. Like the play of children, theology can afford to be joyful, free, and creative. It *can* be these things because of our confidence in the parental love of God, a God who is not only willing to tolerate our foolishness but also somehow rejoices in our efforts.

A colleague of mine recently observed that the latest fad in theological terminology is the word "messy." Theology is "messy." It's a wonderful childhood word. It means that theological thinking takes place in the midst of real life, not the orderly world of methodology, orthodoxy, and hermeneutical principles. Of course, these things are important. But theological thinking must take note of the messy realities of the real world where real

people live and real theology takes place.

Michael Jenkins notes that, ". . . James Herriot, the Yorkshire veterinarian. . . starts his first book, *All Creatures Great and Small*, by telling of how he stripped to the waist one night in a cold barn in the middle of a North Yorkshire winter and laid on his back in cow dung and mud, straining to pull a new calf from its mother. And the whole time he was struggling in the muck and the mud he was cursing under his breath the lovely picture of birth he had been shown in textbooks in veterinary college in Glasgow. The photos in the textbooks were of vets dressed in white lab coats, standing in a clean concrete holding stall, delivering a calf without a drop of blood or muck around."³ Theology is not textbook stuff. Real theology takes place in real life.

Consider, also, another similarity between childhood and theological thinking. Children function in their moral life according to a couple of very basic instincts. "It's not fair," is surely one of those moral lodestones of childhood. Theological thinking, too, ought to be guided according to a couple of basic instincts about God. The familiar mealtime prayer of children gives them to us: "God is great; God is good; Let us thank God for this food." When theology goes wrong, the error can often be traced back to an absence of one of these principles. Perhaps the greatness or sovereignty of God is muted or hedged. Or, perhaps the goodness of God is compromised for a wide variety of reasons. . . for a tidy legal framework. . . for the sake of human autonomy. Or, sometimes, the proper human response of thankfulness is missed, a thankfulness that ought to bloom in a gospel-shaped community of persons. The basic affirmations of this little prayer then ripple out to implicate all other attitudes, instincts, and relationships. The sermons that pastors preach weekly should do precisely that. They spell out the implications of a core set of convictions for all of life, life with all its messiness. . . real life.

There is one further image of the childlike character of theological thinking. If you have ever watched children play, you

have noticed how intense and focused their imaginative worlds are. A playground slide really *becomes* the edge of a dangerous cliff. A garden hose *is* a tightrope. Bushes *are* lions. Children are deeply invested in their play. Just so, passion, focus and investment ought to characterize our theological thinking as well.

N.T. Wright, in *The New Testament and the People of God* gives us an example of this passion and focus. He says, "Suppose there exists a Shakespeare play, most of whose fifth act has been lost. The first four acts provide, let us suppose, such a remarkable wealth of characterization, such a crescendo of excitement within the plot, that it is generally agreed that the play ought to be staged. Nevertheless, it is felt inappropriate actually to write a fifth act once and for all: to do this would freeze the unfinished play into one form. Better, it might be felt, to give the key parts to highly trained, sensitive, and experienced Shakespearean actors, who would immerse themselves in the first four acts, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, and who would then be told to work out a fifth act for themselves."⁴

Theologians are like these Shakespearean actors. We enter into the story as it has been given to us and then we act out the rest of it with both innovation and consistency. The result is a rightness, a fittingness of thought, action, and intention.

MATURITY Finally, we come to the stage of *maturity*, of full-grown theological thinking. What does this look like? Again, a cluster of characteristics comes to mind. But, first, we must not immediately assume that theological maturity is where *we* are! In a sense, we are always being conceived by the grace of God. We are always gestating in worship. We are always born into the community. We must always keep a childlike transparency and sense of play, as well as always confess childlike pettiness and foolishness.

But, maturity in thinking theologically does demonstrate two distinct virtues in addition to what we have already consid-

ered. First, a mature form of theological reflection is humble. Arrogance and turf-protection have no place among us who wish to rightly and truly speak of God. Humility is, of course, a strongly counter-cultural virtue. But it is one we can actively practice in careful listening, honoring the gifts of others, and widely distributing responsibilities and authority in the community. In a congregational setting, these practices can build the mature virtue of humility in the pastors' and the congregation's spiritual character.

Second, and related, a mature theological reflection is conversational. Have you noticed that the politics of the church tend to divide and isolate us from each other? Conservatives talk only to the conservatives. Progressives talk only to the progressives. Feminists talk only to the feminists. Racial-ethnic folks talk only to other racial-ethnic folks. Barthians talk only to the Barthians. How tedious! We must find ways to reach out across ideological divides. This is a *virtue* of mature theological thinking.

Maturity in theological thinking also exhibits one additional characteristic. A mature theological reflection cheerfully admits it is *provisional*. "For now, this is the best I can do," says a mature theologian. "But by the generosity of God's Spirit, I hope to have a better insight tomorrow."

I pray that in all our places of ministry, we will be blessed with wisdom, love, and knowledge in thinking and speaking of God. It is a serious and joyful call to think theologically. May your theological growth and development be to the glory of God and the furthering of God's kingdom.

Michael Jinkins, *Invitation to Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press 2001), pp 21-22

² Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1973), p. 319

³ Michael Jinkins, *op. cit.*, page 66

⁴ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 1996), p. 140

