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Confessing That God Is God

The Relation between Theology and Economy

In Joel and Ethan Coen's 2010 adaptation of Charles Portis's novel *True Grit*, the young protagonist, Mattie Ross, attempts to persuade an auctioneer, Colonel Stonehill, to buy back some ponies traded to her late, murdered father. Stonehill is not as accommodating as one might expect, so Ross goes on the offensive. Not only will he buy back the ponies but he will also fork over reparations for her father's saddle horse that was stolen while under his protection. Again, Stonehill refuses to see what her loss has to do with him. When she tries to appeal to his sense of justice by comparing him to a robbed bank that tells its depositors they are out of luck, the auctioneer quips without missing a beat, "I do not entertain hypotheticals. The world as it is is vexing enough!" As we know, Ross eventually gets the best of the old colonel. Indeed, she already has him against the ropes because Stonehill has simply begged the question: What do we mean when we talk about the world as it is? What things are, and how they are, is always at least set against the background of what they are not. The opening scene implies this much with its quotation of Scripture: "The wicked flee when no one pursues" (Prov 28:1). The many injustices Ross encounters, like a thief's rationality and the limitations of the shadowy characters she marshals to her cause, are set in relief against the background of the justice she seeks and eventually finds.

Something similar confronts theologians when they attempt to answer God's act of self-naming before Moses and so to confess that "God is God" (cf. Ex 3.14). The Nicene Creed emphasizes this identity of God with God not only in its repetition of "one" – "one God, the Father … and one Lord, Jesus Christ" – but also in the language of the Son being

the "only-begotten."[1] Part of what we learn from the fourth-century debates over this confession is that what it means to say "God is God" is always set against the background recognition of what God is not: a creature, a thing alongside other things, an exemplification of something more generic, made up of parts, and so forth – all of which is embraced in traditional teaching about God's simplicity. If this is so, then it seems that the distinction between Creator and creature is in some significant sense dependent on the very relationship it clarifies. It appears, in other words, that entertaining any thought about God above or possibly without the relationship of Creator to creature is impossible. "God with us" is vexing enough! However, to the extent that Christians wish to deny that God is reducible to this relationship, which is what divine simplicity would appear to demand, then an immediate problem arises: How do we think of God as God consistently in such a way that upholds the Creator/creature distinction? What are the consequences for theological thought and speech of Christian teaching that God is simple and therefore irreducible? What, in short, does it mean to say that God is God? How does one uphold such a thought while nevertheless doing justice to the fact that all knowledge and speech about God is only had in relationship to God as Creator and Redeemer? This book aims to better understand these questions and their answers, but first something more should be said about the shape of the underlying problem.

THE PROBLEM OF CONFESSING GOD AS GOD

We can begin to appreciate the broader contours of this problem by reflecting on some of its exegetical and metaphysical dimensions. Theology's perennial concerns typically involve metaphysical questions, but only because they are first and foremost matters of biblical exegesis. This is no less true for the question at hand. One representative example of why this is so comes from the apostle Paul's first chapter of his epistle to the Romans, where he addresses the knowledge of God and its corruption by idolatry. The overarching context for this discussion is how God's wrath has been "revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (Rom 1:18). These persons know something about God in the creation because "God has shown it to them" (Rom 1:19–20). Unfortunately, their

[1] Donald Wood, "Maker of Heaven and Earth," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 14.4 (2012): 384–5.

response to this knowledge is inexcusable because they suppress what they know in unrighteousness, which we discover soon enough stems from idolatry: "For although they knew God they did not glorify him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles" (Rom 1:21–23). Paul's series of contrasts here are significant: true glory exchanged for mere images, the immortal God exchanged for mere mortal things, and the luminosity of a mind that sees all in the light shed upon them by their Creator exchanged for the darkness of a mind of that sees things only in its own light. As the argument progresses, these exchanges have increasingly dire moral consequences, and the root of it all is a transgression of the First Commandment: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:2; Deut 5:6).

The problem Paul identifies is that knowing God is insufficient apart from the moral element of that knowledge eliciting glorification and gratitude to God "as" God (Θεὸν ὡς Θεὸν).[2] What is meant by this easily overlooked qualifier is worked out negatively in the verses that follow as people turn to "the creature rather than the Creator" (Rom 1:25). Stated positively, however, to glorify God as God is to know and practice the "truth about God" (Rom 1:25), to "see fit to acknowledge God" (Rom 1:28). Both of these phrases amplify what it means to glorify God as God, which we might summarize as the confession that God is what and who God is, whereas everything else is not. First, there is an element of acknowledging the truth about God and what it is that God has revealed in creation: God's divinity (Rom 1:20). What this includes exactly we are not told, but the progression of the passage suggests that it means at least a basis for the recognition of an immortality, eternality, glory, and righteousness that are not ours. God's divine nature is something firmly objective, that to which both knowledge and worship of God must

[2] Acts of glorification and gratitude regularly suggest some reference to God's saving benefits (Rom 4:20; 15:6; 1 Cor 6:20; Ps 24:7–10; 29:1). Something different is in mind here, however, because Paul talks about the ungodly and unrighteous, the referent being to those outside the covenant but who nevertheless have received a general knowledge of God and are therefore "without excuse" (Rom 1:20). Whatever glorification or thanksgiving is in view is that which is owed by rational creatures as such, and so his comments extend minimally to the Gentiles.

conform.[3] Second, the glorification of God as God requires that one "see fit to acknowledge God" (Rom 1:28).[4] Acknowledgment here involves having and holding to a true knowledge of God's Godness, retaining it against any and all impulses to replace it or to lay it aside.[5] And to see such acknowledgment as fitting or worthy (ἐδοκίμασαν) of God involves not only an approval but implicitly one based upon an act of distinguishing. This is what Paul has in mind later in the same epistle: those in the Church who serve one another in such a way that promotes peace and humility will be "approved (δόκιμος) by men" (Rom 14:18). That is to say, edifying service to Christ distinguishes those whom the church approves from those whom it does not. In this vein, it is "worthwhile" to retain the true knowledge of God because God alone is God and nothing else is: the distinction underwrites the approval. However, distinguishing between the creature and the Creator must find approbation or else it is morally blameworthy. If the distinction stands alone, it has not been acknowledged. To know the truth about God and then to distinguish this truth, to approve it as worthwhile, and so acknowledge it just is to confess God "as God." What this suggests is that knowing and confessing that God is God requires more than a mere neutral act of intellection but is rather involved with the moral stance of the theologian. How does this figure into the problem at hand?

Paul insists on the fact that suppressing the truth about God as God in unrighteousness is the quintessential act of idolatry, which he also maintains is a revelation of God's wrath. Thus, to the extent that the truth about God is "given up" or "exchanged" for a lie (Rom 1:23, 25, 26), God in turn "gives up" the unrighteous to the debasement of their intellects and desires (Rom 1:24, 26, 28). Though they may profess to be wise, they are in reality "fools" – every bit as blind, deaf, senseless, and immobile as the objects of their devotion (Rom 1:22; Ps 115:3–8). Having failed to retain the truth about God – that is, having failed to discern between creature and Creator – they consequently fail to discern between right

[3] Johann Albrecht Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, ed. M. Ernest Bengel and J. C. F. Steudel, trans. James Bryce, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1860), 20 (on *Rom* 1:21).

[4] Woodenly, "to deem it worthy to hold God in knowledge" (ἐδοκίμασαν τὸν θεὸν ἔχειν ἐν ἐπιγνώσει).

[5] One commentator observes that "to glorify God" in Rom 1:21 involves both "die kognitive Anerkennung des Gottsein Gottes" and "die Huldigung Gottes" and discerns how both aspects appear negatively and positively throughout what Paul says in 1:21–28. Andrie du Toit, "Die kirche als doxologische Gemeinschaft im Römerbrief," in *Focusing on Paul: Persuasion and Theological Design in Romans and Galatians*, ed. Cilliers Breytenbach and David S. du Toit (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 298.

and wrong. They refuse to approve God, and so they instead "approve" what refuses God: envy, murder, strive, deceit, maliciousness, and so much more (Rom 1:29–31). "Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them" (Rom 1:32). This vindicates Tertullian when he argues that "all sins are found in idolatry and idolatry in all sins."[6] The question about how we distinguish between God and creation is therefore an inherently moral question with social and political consequences. Karl Barth makes the observation, still timely, that where "the qualitative distinction between men and the final Omega is overlooked or misunderstood, that fetishism is bound to appear" in which God is exchanged for the creature, and especially the rational creature's "half-spiritual, half-material creations, exhibitions, and representations of His creative ability – Family, Nation, State, Church, Fatherland."[7] Minimally we can see that failure to confess God as God involves a hostile, intemperate, and indulgent way of life, which suggests on the contrary that the way of life supporting this confession will be intrinsically ascetical in some respects. If confession (ὁμολογία) requires acts of prayer, penitence, and praise (Rom 15:9; Jas 5:16), then theology will be "fundamentally purgative of idolatry" in all its forms.[8] A full exploration of these forms and the ascetical acts that resist them is a worthwhile undertaking, but our aim is somewhat more circumspect. Rather what this brief glance at Romans 1 suggests for what follows is that in looking for a satisfactory account of what it means to confess God "as God," we will have to look at what it means to resist what Augustine calls a "flesh-bound habit of thought."[9] That is, we will need to explore what it means to temper the mind's movements and ambitions such that its perception of the truth

[6] Tertullian, *De idololatria: Critical Text, Translation and Commentary*, ed. and trans. J. H. Waszink and J. C. M. van Winden (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 1.5.

[7] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th edn., trans. Edwyn C. Hoskins (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 50.

[8] Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 20.

[9] Augustine, *De Trinitate* [*DT*], trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2010), 8.2. For Augustine, the problem was as much epistemological as moral: "So then it is difficult to contemplate and have full knowledge of God's substance, which without any change in itself makes things that change, and without any passage of time in itself creates things that exist in time. That is why it is necessary for our minds to be purified before that inexpressible reality can be inexpressibly seen by them; and in order to make us fit and capable of grasping it, we are led along more endurable routes, nurtured on faith as long as we have not yet been endowed with that necessary purification" (*DT* 1.3).

does not compromise that truth. Intellectual temperance belongs to this question in both classical and modern forms: Augustine argued the problem was that things "cannot be expressed as they are thought and cannot be thought as they are,"[10] and for the German Idealist tradition following Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Jacobi, the problem was that the mind's conditioned and finite concepts compromise apprehension of the infinite and unconditioned in the very act of thinking.[11] The task of rendering the distinction between Creator and creature is thus bound up intimately with the habits and movements of thought one employs to render it.

Thus far we have suggested that the problem underneath the question of how we confess God as God is bound up with an apostolic concern to avoid idolatry and carries implications for the moral-intellectual habits and stances of the theologian. We may now grasp some of the metaphysical aspects of this problem by reflecting on the underpinnings of a realist commitment in Christian theology, that is, theology concerned with what is really the case. As a science, theology attempts not only to give a coherent account of reality but also to set forth rationally how its various statements correspond to extralinguistic affairs.[12] What is real does, to this extent, exercise a critical function on the nature of theology's systematic claims. In the face of competing visions of reality, however, Christian theology ventures distinctive claims based upon its equally distinctive articles of faith. Doubtless, some of these articles render Christian claims more distinctive than others: belief in creation is at least formally held in common with Judaism and Islam, but belief in Jesus Christ's full deity, or the reconciling and re-creative efficacy of his Cross and Resurrection, leave no room for such formal similarities. So regardless of its formal proximity or distance to other forms of belief, Christian confession depends on the deliverances of divine teaching that shape its understanding of reality, and this understanding is in important ways distinctive. Indeed, part of Christian theology's claim about what is real is that the church exists in the sphere of divine teaching. This contributes to the reasons for Christian theology's realist concern with what is, even if it does not exhaust them. For to say that theology depends on the deliverances of divine teaching just is to invoke the axiomatic belief in the reality of God's presence and activity, a necessary condition of Christian confession. "I am with you always," Jesus promises his disciples

[10] Augustine, *DT* 5.4.
[11] Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (London: Routledge, 2005), 163.
[12] A. N. Williams, *The Architecture of Theology: Structure, System, and Ratio* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

and by extension the church built on their foundation (Matt 28:20; Eph 2:20). And since "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8), God remains active always and everywhere; love is actual or else it is not love.[13] Paul can thus write to the church at Rome with confidence: "neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38–39). Furthermore, since theology takes it that God is the founding reality of all other realities, then it inevitably seeks to relate what is actual to what is most actual (*actualissimus*), and thus to the reality of God in its midst but not merely in its midst. Love "is from God," but "God is love" (1 Jn 4:7–8); God loves us in Christ "before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4), and Christ is both "before all things" (Col 1:17) and "above all" (Jn 3:31). Metaphysical concerns are thereby intrinsic to theology in the sense that it attempts to understand things in light of their principles (*principia*). As a science that seeks to "reduce" or trace things to their first principle and final end in accordance with divine instruction, theology's concern with the actual terminates in its concern to see all things in relation to God in some respect.

This state of affairs characterizes theology in two ways that will prove important for our inquiry, and which also drive us deeper into the problem Paul diagnoses in Romans 1. First, theology's dependency on the articles of faith means that it is responsive to God's gracious initiative in revealing himself through his covenant with Israel, and the gifts of himself in the missions of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Theology is thus marked by its religious responsibility to God as an act of worshipful gratitude, as we have already seen. Given divine teaching, what follows for theology is not further divinely inspired teaching but rather hearing, receptivity, and confession of that which has been given "once for all" (Jude 3). The mode of this confession is further shaped by the fact that it responds to the presence and activity of God. This inseparability of divine presence and teaching is part of the reason why the Christian church celebrates Christ's giving of his body and blood together with a conviction of Christ's presence in her midst, however this is understood. Second, theology's responsiveness to the generosity of God's teaching assumes something of a "speculative" character. There is an obvious sense in which theology should not be "speculative," where this is understood

[13] Ingolf U. Daferth, *Becoming Present: An Inquiry into the Christian Sense of the Presence of God* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 140.

pejoratively to consist in unchecked curiosity: theology seeks only to know its subject matter with an intimacy proper to its givenness and thus without departing from theology's essential dependence on the Giver.[14] When properly tempered, theology receives its goods from God's hands and does not seek prideful mastery over what is real, nor does it seek to find something more fundamental than what it is given. A negative example along these lines might be the search for determinate "possibilities" in the divine mind from which the actual world arose. If reflection on what is possible is known only in light of what is actual, then the latter retains its material priority.[15] Theology therefore seeks to perceive truth by seeing into the actual insofar as it is given to see, and in this sense it is speculative as rational analysis of a matter to the extent that it is given for such analysis (*ratio ratiocinata*). But to what extent does God give himself to be known? Here God's actuality exercises some sway over what a theological culture will consider impoverished and excessive forms of speculative reason. Where the deposit of Christian teaching is assumed to be exhausted in reflection on the benefits of Christ and the history of God's works, or where the inhibition on theological inquiry posed by divine incomprehensibility precipitates a despair of the question of God in himself, then speculation will be considered vainly curious where it ventures statements encroaching on noumenal matters. The assumption here is that what is really real is fundamentally or exclusively phenomenal or historical, which might minimally be another way of saying that well-ordered theological reason will be absorbed with God's effects. Alternatively, some denial of divine incomprehensibility might consider

[14] See here Paul J. Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 50–74.

[15] On the connection between actualism and the grammar of creation as gift, see John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 108–12. For a cogent philosophical defense of actualism over possibilism that nevertheless allows for discussion of "nonactual possible worlds … logically constructed out of the furniture of the actual world," see Robert Merrihew Adams, "Theories of Actuality," in *The Possible and the Actual: Readings in the Metaphysics of Modality*, ed. Michael J. Loux (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 190–209 (203). The ontological priority of actuality in theology has been challenged most notably on eschatological grounds by Eberhard Jüngel, "The World as Possibility and Actuality: The Ontology of the Doctrine of Justification," in *Theological Essays*, trans. J. B. Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 95–123. Ingolf U. Dalferth echoes Jüngel to an extent in "*Possibile absolutum*: The Theological Discovery of the Ontological Priority of the Possible," in *Rethinking the Medieval Legacy for Contemporary Theology*, ed. Anselm K. Min (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 91–129. However, neither author seems invested in the kind of possibilism presented here.

speculation impoverished when and where theology fails to name God in a fashion adequate to God's own self-knowledge. Here the reality to which theology responds is but another instance of the intramundane realities with which we are familiar. Then there are configurations located between these extremes, and such are the configurations that we will investigate in this book. But already theological reason's encounter with what is real bears two notable features: its responsibility to acknowledge in gratitude God's presence and activity as God, and its responsibility to acknowledge God in a way that corresponds to the mode in which God gives himself to be known. The critical problem for theology in this respect, as opposed to philosophical apologetics or philosophy of religion, does not concern the possibility of divine self-revelation, but rather precisely what the mode of that self-revelation's actuality *is* and what constitutes a proper response to it. So again we confront the question: How do we confess God as God? As we can now see, precisely what the phrase "as God" means is not self-evident because it might mean "as God is in himself" or "as God has revealed himself," or something else. Whatever it means to confess God as God must be discerned carefully and argued accordingly.

The foregoing suffices as a preliminary outline of the problem underneath the question of how we are to confess God as God in such a way that upholds the Creator/creature distinction. By no means is this outline exhaustive of the issues, which will acquire greater texture throughout the course of this study. What this brief canvassing of matters shows us is that the problem of confessing God as God involves concerns about both the moral and intellectual orientation of theological inquiry as well as the objective reality to which it is oriented. This book proposes to address the problem by looking not only to considerations of theology's object, God, but also to theology's construal of the relation between theology (θεολογία) and economy (οἰκονομία).[16] For our purposes theology and economy correspond to God's nature and God's works, respectively. It is by means of the coordination of theology and economy, after all, that

[16] For an introduction to this central theme, see Michel R. Barnes, "Oeconomia," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson, Michael P. McHugh, and Frederick W. Norris, vol. 2: L–Z (New York: Garland, 1997), 825–7; John Behr, *The Nicene Faith: True God of True God*. The Formation of Christian Theology, vol. 2, part 1 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 208–15. For its semantic uses in Scripture, see Hermann Cremer, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek*, trans. William Urwick (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1895), 450–1; J. Goetzmann, "οἰκονομία," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Colin Brown, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 253–6.

theological inquiry assumes a disposition with which it views its object and subsequently seeks to articulate rationally what it has seen. Where one locates the standpoint and dispositions of the theologian relative to theology's object involves judgments about how moral and intellectual virtues are operative in and relevant to theological reason. Different configurations of theology and economy likewise entail different construals of what is given for theology to see into and perceive with grateful adoration. In brief, the argument is that a proper configuration of theology and economy requires two things: first, that theology exhibit how God's perfection does not require his relation to creation; second, that theology depict the intelligibility of God's perfection in himself in such a way that licenses the claim that God would be God in undiminished perfection and goodness without creation. Hence we must ask: Does it suffice to articulate God's perfection as set forth in God's works, or must we confess something about God's perfection as logically antecedent to and possibly obtaining without those acts that ground created reality? In some way, theology must retain some priority over economy. However, it is imperative that the priority in view eschews any configuration that sunders theology from economy as much as the opposite. Our coordination of theology and economy succeeds with respect to both requirements when it enables the consistent and thorough acknowledgment of God's qualitative distinction from creation in its statements and in those statements' conceptual form. The critical norm for these criteria and the judgments that will satisfy them is a concern to confess God as God, and thus as qualitatively distinct from creation ontically and noetically: God is not in a genus (*Deus non est in genere*). As we will see, this critical norm is bound up with how one interprets and deploys the doctrine of God's simplicity, the notion that God is wholly and consistently God and therefore irreducible. In other words, failure to prosecute consistently the thought that divinity is not generic risks the corresponding failure to confess God as God (rather than merely as the horizon for practical judgments, political hopes, and so forth) in our thoughts: "Everything depends on God's not only being recognised as the one who is unique, but on His being treated in the way which is His due, as the One who is unique … It is not an easy thing to apply [knowledge of God's uniqueness] with the required universality."[17] To conclude our introduction to the problem of confessing God as God, we may ask two further questions: What is the character of this knowledge, and what is its requisite universality?

[17] II/1:445.