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Triple Knowledge and the Reformation Faith

Theological Accents
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Religions commonly make claims to know something, and these claims form the foundation of each religion. Examples quickly come to mind, like Muhammad's claim to revelations or the claim of secret knowledge which is so central to all the varieties of Gnosticism. The vast array of new cults and sects which continually appear usually contain some new knowledge claim, often related to the founder, who may be regarded as a new prophet. And this common trait of many religions connects very closely with an important phenomenon of human consciousness which we sometimes ignore: people have a recurring, perhaps unavoidable tendency to regard something as an indubitable standard or source of knowledge or truth, even if this is not described in customary religious terms. When non-religious language is used to describe this standard, it may be called "reason," or "science," or "tradition," though very often people simply do not clarify the source of knowledge which they regard as somehow infallible or inerrant. Critical thinkers will obviously observe that this almost unavoidable human tendency to regard something as an indubitable standard of truth is closely associated with the knowledge claims encountered in religions. It seems probable that this tendency to regard something as the standard of truth is itself a necessary part of our religious nature as human beings, a necessity that has to be honestly acknowledged and not somehow disguised.

Classical Protestantism is interesting in regard to the complexity of the knowledge claims at the center of the perspective. This complexity sets classical Reformation theology apart from two of its rivals, fundamentalism and liberalism. Christian fundamentalism generally lacks this complexity in its knowledge claims, neglecting the differentiation of knowledge regarding both the sources of knowledge and the types of knowledge; there is often not a sufficient level of distinction between law and gospel, between creation knowledge and redemption knowledge, between general revelation and special revelation. Religious liberalism, *at first glance*, has the opposite problem, a lack of transparency in its knowledge claims; it tends toward a largely negative stance toward all knowledge claims and is

often characterized by what this movement thinks one cannot know; this neglects the way in which a claim "not to know" is itself a decisive knowledge claim, though a claim that the speaker or writer may try to disguise. Such disguised, non-transparent knowledge claims were a typical problem of multiple atheistic intellectual trends in the last century, and some of these trends were uncritically absorbed by liberal Protestantism. Very ironically, the context of non-transparent knowledge claims in liberal Protestantism gives rise to a continuing series of programs of liberal theology, each slightly different from the others, each led by a new academic prophet who gives authoritative voice to "a new truth." This has similarities both to ancient Gnosticism and to the new religious cults, both of which arise out of a cultural context that doubts all truth. Liberalism thus tends to have one important similarity to fundamentalism, that of an overly simplified approach to knowledge that comes through a single authority.

Like all Christians in the Augustinian tradition, classical Protestants regard all truth of all types as ultimately coming from God, so that truth has ontological objectivity in spite of the obvious epistemological subjectivity of truth implied by our many mistakes and contradictions.[1] And like most Christians, the classical Reformers thought the creation itself is one of the ways in which God reveals himself, that God was specially speaking in and through Jesus, the Christ, and that the Bible is a unique gift of God.[2] The Reformation slogan *sola scriptura* did not precisely mean that Holy Scripture is our only source of true knowledge about God, the world, or ourselves; it meant that human claims to knowledge (about God, the world, or ourselves), meaning those claims made by other authorities and sources (whether church, tradition, reason, or personal experience) had to be evaluated in light of Holy Scripture, which was the only source of knowledge which was above the normal human limitations and mistakes (hence, the key word *sola*). The Reformers greatly valued knowledge gained by means of natural science, the humanities, and the careful use of reason, regarding such knowledge as coming from God, but to reduce the probability of massive mistakes in all areas of knowledge, they claimed the Scriptures were useful as a type of eyeglasses, to help us see things clearly. The type of knowledge claim made here is quite complex.

There is a further important way in which the knowledge claims of Reformation theology are both clear and complex and in this way different from the knowledge claims of both fundamentalism and theological liberalism. This is seen in the notion of "triple knowledge" articulated in the second question and answer in the Heidelberg Catechism.

The language used is intended to directly follow the first question, about our comfort.[3] "How many things must you know that you may live and die in the blessedness of this comfort?" The

answer: "Three. First, the greatness of my sin and wretchedness. Second, how I am freed from all my sins and their wretched consequences. Third, what gratitude I owe to God for such redemption."

The shortness of this answer might make us miss its profundity. In roughly thirty words, the authors claim to outline the connections among our understanding of human nature, including existential self-knowledge, the role of authentic religion or faith in human life, and the meaning of daily life, including all of ethics. These few words abbreviate the multifaceted analysis of these themes in the previous forty-five years of the Reformation, including the work of both Martin Luther and John Calvin. The differentiated relation of reason to law and to gospel; the dialectical relation between knowledge of self and knowledge of God; the relation between law and gospel; the different uses of God's law; the different relations of the gospel to the different uses of God's law; the relation between creation and the moral law; the differences between knowledge of God the Creator and God the Redeemer; the transcendental conditions of all human knowledge; the contradictions between the accepted and the rejected knowledge of God; and the different types of righteousness are all background themes in these three simple points. Obviously this is more than I can explain in one lecture. But at the core of classical Protestantism stands the notion of triple knowledge as the key to authentic faith, transparency about our knowledge claims, and an honest view of human nature, religion, and life. Each part of this triple knowledge is worthy of extensive commentary; only a short introduction will be possible here.

I The Human Situation: Guilt and Fallenness

People can hardly avoid asking what is wrong with the world; many have attempted to describe the human predicament. Who of us can remain untouched when Albert Camus describes the absurdity of life or when Karl Marx analyses the many levels of human alienation or when Plato longs to rise from the cave of mere shadowy perceptions to real knowledge of Being Itself? At Heidelberg the human predicament was described as "sin and wretchedness." The word "sin" here means not primarily a particular action; in this usage, the word "sin" describes the human problem of being both alienated from God and having something wrong in the center of our beings, so that we have a deep inclination toward evil. Words like "pride," "unbelief," and "ingratitude" were often used by the Reformers to describe what is wrong with human nature, and this "bent" character of human life was seen as so deep that we are not able to make ourselves straight again. Therefore, as a result of "sin" in this sense, arises our status of "wretchedness," our comprehensive alienation from ourselves, from

each other, and from nature. Human beings are seen as alienated from God, themselves, and each other. The description of the human predicament given in the Heidelberg Catechism can include, clarify, and give additional depth to many other partial or secondary descriptions of the human predicament.

Religion quickly becomes very shallow and trivial when it ignores or denies human sin. Saint Augustine confronted Pelagius many centuries ago when Pelagius said sin is merely a problem of imitating bad habits; Augustine argued conclusively that sin reaches very close to the origins of the human race and is therefore properly called "original sin." A similar line of thought arose at the time of the Reformation in the Renaissance religious humanism of Erasmus of Rotterdam; he advocated a religious humanism that did not say anything about sin and redemption, not recognizing the depth of the human predicament. A similar naiveté about human evil is seen in much of the Enlightenment and in both the liberal theology and the religious pietism which follow the Enlightenment.

But how do we *know* our situation in terms of understanding the human predicament properly? The Heidelberg answer is "from the Law of God."[4] At this point it is important to remember the complexity of Reformation epistemology. For all of the main Reformers agreed that we encounter the Law of God in multiple ways. On the one hand, we encounter the Law of God by means of the Ten Commandments, given on Mount Sinai and recorded in the Bible. The unchanging Law was written in stone, and these commandments were seen as forming the outline of all biblical moral rules. These commandments have the ability to show us that we cannot and often do not want to do what is right; indeed, we often do things that are wrong because we want to be rebels and want to do something because of the wrongness of the action. In this way, the Ten Commandments show us the depth of our alienation from God, self, and each other. On the other hand, the Reformers also claimed that the Law of God is revealed through creation, including being revealed through our own creation in the image of God. Therefore, even the person who has never read the Ten Commandments still has a partial encounter with the Law of God and can have a partial, though distorted, awareness of the human problem. People often sense that something is wrong with us or with the world, and they try to express this problem in words. Yet even Plato, Marx, and Camus missed the depth, the real *greatness*, of our fallen condition because they did not see human life *coram Deo*, before God and his law.

This first type of knowledge is very hard to describe adequately. It is not only my own sense that I am not what I should be, not only a sociological or philosophical description of the human dilemma, not only a sense that something is missing from my life, not only a sense that I have done things that are

wrong that have hurt other people. It is all of that, with the added depth of awareness that says that in and through the entire problem is an alienation from God that is the cause of the other types of alienation. In the deepest sense, it is the knowledge of self as human, the type of knowledge which John Calvin claimed stands in a dialectical relationship with the ultimate knowledge, the knowledge of God. It is the knowledge that makes an honest person cry out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

2 The Solution: The Christian Gospel

Almost everyone who thinks seriously about the human predicament suggests a solution that corresponds to his assessment of the problem. Plato, Marx, and Camus each offered a way of salvation that correlated with their different assessments of the human situation. The Heidelberg authors, with the rest of the Reformation, also presented a solution that corresponds to their understanding of the human problem. This is the great Reformation dialectic of law and gospel. And this is a point of frequent misunderstanding.

If the human dilemma is alienation from God that leads to other types of alienation, one might conclude that the natural thing to do is to set ourselves right with God. But, according to the Reformation, this response is exactly wrong, even though it is the response found in many religions, including the many forms of aberrant or distorted Christianity. In the second part of the triple knowledge, about the solution, the emphasis falls on *how* I am freed from sin and its wretched consequences. The solution is not what I or we must *do.* The solution is what God has done for us in Christ. The eternal God became a man, Jesus of Nazareth, who is the Christ, the Messiah, and the Savior of the world. This is what we celebrate at Christmas. And this Jesus Christ lived a perfect life and then suffered a totally unjust death on the cross, celebrated as Good Friday. In this death he took all the punishment from God that I deserve, to meet the demands of eternal justice. Then he rose from the grave on the third day, showing that death had been defeated and the payment for all my guilt and evil had been made in full. I need to trust in the promise proclaimed by this work of God, that he was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, and by trust in this promise, I am declared right before God. This is justification by faith alone; while I am still an alienated sinner, God declares me right before him, forgives me, and adopts me back as his child. This is the second part of the triple knowledge, and it comes only by faith. It is the center of the knowledge of God.

In our time, we cannot avoid questions of truth and believability. Can we really believe this good news to be true? Let me say only this: there is very strong evidence that Jesus really lived and died at the time the Bible reports; there is strong evidence that many events in his

life fulfilled ancient promises made by the Hebrew prophets over the centuries; and there is convincing evidence that he really rose from the grave. But, that his death was a payment for my guilt and the evil inside of me is purely a matter of trust in a promise that is, I am convinced, a promise of God. At the right time, I can offer evidence for the existence of God, really that we all presuppose the existence of God in our daily lives, as the transcendental condition of what we do. At the right time, I can offer serious evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. But ultimately I have to decide to trust in a promise, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. At this point I simply stand before God with or without naked faith, with or without basic trust.

According to classical Reformation theology, pure trust in the promise of God in the gospel is the heart of real faith. It is a matter between the soul and God. For this reason, real faith is not something that can be imposed by any social institution. But it is wise, I think, for us to provide for social institutions, churches, and educational programs that will make this gospel known to our people. And I would add that if people do not trust in this promise, they will be strongly inclined to believe in some other religious promise. Belief in religious promises is an inescapable part of the human condition. The real question is the type and quality of religious promise in which people will trust, and, therefore, the quality of religion which they will practice. In the last century, many people placed their religious trust in the promises made by Hitler and Marx; the consequences were totally inhumane. Trust in the Christian gospel leads to totally difference consequences.

3 The Direction of Life: Gratitude

How should we live our daily lives? Is there any unifying meaning, or do we merely do a number of disconnected actions? Are there any rules or values or principles to guide us, or do we find ourselves at the mercy of our instincts? But then, which instincts should we follow, and why is it that we are often aware that we should follow some instincts and that we should not follow other instincts? These are the questions of the third part of the triple knowledge described by the Heidelberg authors, questions which we usually call those of meaning, direction, and ethics. And the title they selected for this set of topics is "gratitude I owe to God."

What is so fresh and invigorating here is that daily life, in work, family, and society, is both the context for gratitude to God and the means of showing our gratitude to God. There is no separation of life, ethics, and religion. And the proper gratitude is one that is conscious of both the gifts of God as our Creator, which he gives to all men and women, and also his gifts of redemption, which he gives to those who believe the promise of the gospel. Gratitude for creation

and redemption becomes the meaning of life that sets the direction for our lives.

Under this heading, the Heidelberg authors discuss many questions of ethics, again using the Ten Commandment as the outline of a life of gratitude. Gratitude, they thought, is properly demonstrated by a life that is ethically ordered by God's commandments. But once again, their complex view of knowledge must not be forgotten. One must never forget that they thought that God's moral demands were built into creation and that God is continuously speaking his moral law through his creation; this is the same God speaking through creation and Scripture. Therefore, it is very common for many people to have some vague ideas of duties, values, and the results of our actions on other people. This vague idea of right and wrong may need to be improved or reformed, but it is often enough to enable many people to be good neighbors and good citizens, which they called "civil righteousness." Because of this common but unclarified knowledge of God's moral demand, most people do not become as evil as they could become; most people have some type of moral restraint.

But this common moral restraint needs to be substantially renewed. The first step is to honestly recognize that it is not a way to earn God's favor or acceptance. That acceptance by God only comes by trust in the promise of the gospel, not by following any moral, civil, or religious law. A second step may be to see that our knowledge of what is right and what is wrong may need to be improved; we are sometimes simply mistaken about what is right and wrong. And the third step is to see our daily lives as the place of loving our neighbors and showing our gratitude to God. And for these reasons, there is a massive overlap and continuity between true civil righteousness and the life of worship, which means thanking God by means of our daily lives.

In classical Reformation theology, the theological assessment of the human predicament can take the proposals of the secular philosophers and make them deeper and more complete.[5] Something similar is true in the realm of ethics: classical Reformation theology can take the observations of many better moral philosophers and make them deeper and more complete. Both are true because of the complex nature and means of knowledge: God's law, both in its function of unveiling the human predicament and in its role of guiding life, comes to us both in creation and in Holy Scripture. Therefore, even many people will have a partial knowledge of these matters, even if they do not understand the full depth of the matter: that the human predicament is one of alienation from God and the renewed life is one of gratitude to God.

Comments

It is my claim that the notion of triple knowledge found in classical Reformation theology has several huge advan-

tages. It sets us free from the typical mistakes of both religious fundamentalism and religious liberalism, which usually have overly simplified notions of knowledge. It gives us significant direction for working on many questions of faith and learning in a variety of types of academic disciplines; as we have seen, it is an important part of considering the relation of faith to philosophy, and something similar could be said in relation to fields such as psychology and sociology. It gives significant guidance for questions of the role of faith in culture. It provides a conceptual framework for Christians and their leaders to assess what may be missing in the faith and internal life of individuals or congregations. And it provides Protestant educators and pastors with an easy outline of the kinds of effects they want their classes and sermons to have in the lives of people. I am glad to recommend the notion of triple knowledge found in the Heidelberg Catechism, which represents one of the great treasures of the classical Reformation.

Annotation
Anmerkungen

[1] This clear distinction between the ontological objectivity of truth and epistemological subjectivity shows one of the ways in which Reformation thought is significantly different from both modern philosophy, which thought in terms of objective truth, and postmodern philosophy, which often emphasizes the subjective side of our perceptions of truth at the cost of losing any notion of objective truth.

[2] At this point, classical Protestant theology is quite different from the theology influenced by Karl Barth, who denied that God in any way speaks through creation.

[3] Question and answer one, of *The Heidelberg Catechism*: "What is your only comfort in life and death? That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live for him.

[4] This is answer 3 in the catechism.

[5] The various types of secular moral philosophy often have very insightful secondary or penultimate observations both about the human predicament and about our duties, but these observations tend to be distorted by the failure to understand human life before God. If God is not properly recognized, people usually worship a God-substitute, even if this worship is not openly confessed. This process of worshipping a God-substitute usually leads to absolutizing one dimension of moral life and experience at the expense of misunderstanding other dimensions of moral life and experience. A proper recognition of God as the Creator and Redeemer, and therefore as the true and real *Ultimate*, makes it possible for us to give proper weight to the various secondary or penultimate observations about our duties and the human predicament. A person's (or a culture's) view of the ultimate always informs how that person (or that culture) perceives the penultimate or secondary.

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