Reforming Ministry:

Theology and the Witness of the Other

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In the event of the Word of God, the revelation of truth, scripture functions as the Spirit inspired attestation and witness to the self-revelation of God through the creaturely medium of the words of the prophets and the apostles. These words are imbedded in a socially constructed linguistic context. This means that the means used by God in revelation, in this case the medium of human language, continues to bear the inherent limitations of its creaturely and finite character in spite of the use God makes of it as a bearer of truth in its witness to revelation. Hence, while scripture is inspired by the Spirit and is truth written, it nevertheless remains subject to the historically and culturally conditioned character that attends to all human language.

One of the entailments of the contextual character of the Bible as an inspired and true witness to the event of revelation is its plurality. Canonical scripture is itself a diverse collection of witnesses or, put another way, a manifold witness to the revelation of divine truth, which is itself characterized by Trinitarian plurality. In fact, the Bible is not so much a single book as it is a collection of authorized texts written from different settings and perspectives. Each of the voices represented in the canonical collection maintains a distinct point of view that emerges from a particular time and place. In other words, the Bible is polyphonic, made up of many voices.

The self-revelatory speech-act of God is received among diverse communities over long periods of time and in a plurality of cultural settings. The human reception and response is shaped by the communal and cultural settings in which revelation occurs. This is part of the act of revelation itself that creates its own hearers and places them and their response firmly in the event itself. Here we remember that it is the directedness of the Word of God to human beings that means the human response must be included in the event of revelation and the talk about God that it enables.

The revelation of the triune God is received in a plurality of cultural settings and is expressed and proclaimed from these diverse contexts to others over the course of history in accordance with the sending of the church into the world as a representative of the image and mission of God. As truth written, scripture paradigmatically reflects this plurality and diversity. In this way scripture is the constitutive and normative witness for the formation and proclamation of Christian community. At the same time, it is also the first in an ever expanding series of presentations of the Christian faith throughout history for which it is paradigmatic.

In this polyphonic collection, each voice makes a distinct contribution to the whole and none manifests dominance over the others. The Bible contains a diversity of literary forms such as narrative, law, prophecy, wisdom, parable, epistle and others. And within each of these forms we have the expression of numerous canonical perspectives. The presence of four Gospels provides the most obvious and most instructive example of plurality in the biblical canon. The inclusion of four gospel accounts in the canon points to the multifaceted and pluriform nature of the gospel message. It also stands as a paradigmatic affirmation that the witness of the Christian community to the gospel of Jesus Christ, in accordance with the canonical tradition, can never be contained in a single, fixed perspective.

In keeping with this perspective the early church resisted attempts at harmonizing the Gospels into one single account, such as that of the *Diatessaron* of the early church writer Tatian. The fourfold witness of to the gospel of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John indicates the irreducibility of the gospel of Jesus Christ to a single account. This means that true "catholic" faith is pluralistic. "It is 'according to the whole,' not in the sense that it encompasses the whole in a single, systematic, entirely coherent unit, but rather in the sense that it allows for the openness, for the testimony of plural perspectives and experiences, which is implied in the fourfold canonical witness to the gospel."[1] The multiplicity of the canonical witness to the gospel is not incidental the shape of the community from which it emerged under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and which it envisions for the future. Attempts to suppress the plurality of the canonical witness by means of an overarching, universalistic account will lead to serious distortions of the gospel and the community that is called to bear witness to it.

The plurality of forms and perspectives imbedded in the biblical witness suggests that no single voice or interpretive approach will be able to do justice to this diversity. Further, it may also be taken to imply the any of the forms and perspectives in the Bible itself will fail to bear adequate witness to the self-revelation of the Triune God if they are abstracted from the other forms and perspectives and used in a reductionistic fashion. In relating these diverse forms as the Word of God it is important to envision their plurality-in-unity and unity-in-plurality. As theologian Kevin Vanhoozer asserts: "strictly speaking, the diverse canonical parts neither contradict nor cohere with one another, for both these notions presuppose either the presence or absence of conceptual consistency. But this is to assume that the various books of the canon are

[1] Justo L. González, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 22.

playing the same language game. They are not. Two notions that occupy different conceptual systems are nevertheless *compatible* if neither negates the other."[2]

It is worth reminding ourselves at this point that this plurality should not and cannot be construed as leading to an anything goes sort of relativism. The Christian conviction that God speaks rules out this sort of approach, and the acknowledgement of diversity and plurality in the Bible must not be used as an attempt to support such a perspective. In addition, as witness to the revelatory speech-act of the triune God, the plurality of scripture should not be used as a denial of the unity of the canon. In keeping with the conviction that the Bible is inspired by the Spirit for the purpose of bearing witness to the self-revelation of God and guiding the church into truth, we affirm that the Bible constitutes a unity as well as plurality. But this unity is a differentiated unity expressed in plurality.

As such, the Bible has given rise to a variety of meanings and interpretations that are derived from the work of exegesis, theology, and the particular social and historical situations that have shaped its interpreters. In task of seeking to read the Bible as a unity-in-plurality and plurality-in-unity, we should expect a variety of models and interpretations due to the very nature of the canonical texts themselves. They authorize multiple perspectives within a set of possibilities that are also appropriately circumscribed by the shape and content of the canon. The point here is not that anything goes, but rather that within the context of what "goes" we should expect plurality. Indeed, the plurality of the church is a faithful expression of the plurality of scripture which is in turn a faithful witness to the plurality of truth lived out in the eternal life of God and expressed in the act of revelation.

[2] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Westminster John Knox, 2005), 275.

As the Word of God and *normative* witness to revelation, scripture consists of inspired human speech-acts that bear authentic witness to the divine speech-act of the event of revelation. As such, scripture is truth written and its pages bear manifold witness to the plurality of truth. As the Word of God and *paradigmatic* human and creaturely witness to the event of revelation, scripture also invites greater plurality than that contained in its pages, in order that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the witness of the church to the truth in the world may be continually expanded to all the nations in keeping with the mission of God.

Forms of theology are properly shaped by the Word of God as the plurality of truth will continually be characterized by openness to the witness of the Other. This is consistent with the rule of love that governs all forms of Christian discourse that would be faithful to the One who loves in freedom. The emphasis on otherness is a particularly promising aspect of postmodern thought and one that has great significance for the practice of theology. Perhaps the most prominent voice raising the awareness of the Other is the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who has provided a relentless critique of all totalizing forms of thought and reason that make no place for the Other and lead to marginalization and oppression. If theology is to resist the dangers of cultural accommodation and fulfill its obligation to bear faithful witness to the Word of God it must be open to the primacy of the Other.

Among the connotations associated with the idea of otherness arising from the work of Levinas and other thinkers are philosophical/ethical and eschatological concerns. Here we will focus on the philosophical/ethical sense of the term in which the Other is viewed as anything or anyone that falls outside of one's own categories. Here the realm and context of a person's own particular self, or what Levinas calls the "same," is constantly confronted and pierced by that which is other. That which cannot be confined in the categories of the same. The challenge with

respect to this aspect of the Other is to refrain from its violation by reducing it to the self-enclosed realm of the same and thereby forcing it into a homogenous, self-made mold that serves to efface it and eliminate its distinctive difference, its very otherness in relation to the same.

One of the ways in which concern for the voice of the Other bears on the practice of Christian theology is manifested in contexts where the hegemony and dominance of a particular set of social and cultural assumptions and presuppositions have served to stamp the Bible and theology in its image. When this occurs, the voices of those who do not participate in the assumptions and presuppositions of the majority are marginalized or eclipsed, often under the guise of claims that they are not being faithful to scripture or the Christian tradition by seeking to import a particular cultural agenda into the discipline of theology.

This is one of the great dangers of cultural hegemony in theology. It easily leads the suppression of voices that do not fit the accepted cultural norms for the practice of theology. This is one of the dangers of allowing the tradition of the church to function in too authoritative a fashion in the work of theology. While the tradition of the church is an important aspect of a theology of the Word of God from which we can learn a great deal for our constructive work, we can also observe the ways in which that tradition has worked against and suppressed the emergence of appropriate manifestations of diversity.

Now one might wish to argue at this point that such a claim is false. After all, the Christian tradition has produced considerable diversity. This diversity is evident in the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodoxy Church, and the churches of Protestantism. Yet, this diversity is often the diversity that emerges from a *particular* cultural perspective, which to be sure is an appropriate manifestation of diversity, but is not in itself the fullness of diversity called forth by the truth of the Word of God as it is received in the *multiplicity of all* cultural

perspectives. And the sad reality is that in the practice of much North American theology, the cultural assumptions, developments, and traditions of early modern Europe have exercised a hegemony that has too often been viewed as normative for theology to the exclusion of other perspectives. In so far as these other perspectives have been marginalized or largely ignored as "special interest" theologies, they represent the voice of the Other that demands attention if the Christian community is to be a faithful witness to the Word of God.

In order to understand the effects of cultural hegemony on the ability of the church to hear the Word of God in all the fullness of its plurality, let us consider the testimony of the African-American theologian James H. Cone concerning the significance of the black community and the black experience for theology. Cone was the most prominent figure in the articulation of Black Theology in the sixties and two of his books, *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), stand at the at the headwaters of the development of Black Theology in the North American context. In his book, *God of the Oppressed* (1975), Cone offers what he described in 1997 as his most developed theological position. In the introduction to this work Cone reflects on the challenge of doing theology from the perspective of the black community and the black experience in the midst of Christian tradition coupled with dominant power structures of white cultural hegemony:

> I respect what happened at Nicea and Chalcedon and the theological input of the Church Fathers on Chrstology; but that source alone is inadequate for finding out the meaning of black folks' Jesus. It is all right to say as did Athanasius that the Son is *homoousia* (one substance with the Father), especially if one has a taste for Greek philosophy and a feel for the importance of intellectual distinctions. And I do not want to minimize or detract from the significance of Athanasius' assertion for faith one iota. But the *homoousia* question is not a black question. Blacks do not ask whether Jesus is one with the Father or divine and human, though the orthodox formulations are implied in their language. They ask whether Jesus is walking with them, whether they can call him up on the 'telephone of prayer' and tell him all about their troubles. To be sure Athanasius' assertion about the status of the *Logos* in the Godhead is important for the church's continued Christological investigations. But we must not forget that Athanasius'

question about the Son's status in relation to the Father did not arise in the historical context of the slave codes and the slave drivers. And if he had been a black slave in America, I am sure he would have asked a different set of questions. He might have asked about the status of the Son in relation to slaveholders. Perhaps the same is true of Martin Luther and his concern about the ubiquitous presence of Jesus Christ at the Lord's Table. While not diminishing the importance of Luther's theological concern, I am sure that if he had been born a black slave his first question would not have been whether Jesus was at the Lord's Table but whether he was really present at the slave's cabin, whether slaves could expect Jesus to be with them as they tried to survive the cotton field, the whip, and the pistol.

Unfortunately not only white seminary professors but some blacks as well have convinced themselves that only the white experience provides the appropriate context for questions and answers concerning things divine. They do not recognize the narrowness of their experience and the particularity of their theological expressions. They like to think of themselves as *universal* people. That is why most seminaries emphasize the need for appropriate *tools* in doing theology, which always means *white* tools, i.e., knowledge of the language and thought of white people. They fail to recognize that other people also have thought about God and have something significant to say about Jesus' presence in the world.

My point is that one's social and historical context decides not only the questions we address to God but also the mode or form of the answers given to the questions.[3]

Theology is not a universal language. It is situated language that reflects the goals, aspirations, and beliefs of a particular people, a particular community. No statement of theology can speak for all. When we assume that a *particular theology* is a *universal theology* for all people the result is injustice and indifference to the humiliation and suffering of others. It is nothing less than a form of oppressive idolatry by which a particular group is empowered by the idols they have constructed, while others are painfully disenfranchised.

In the United States (and in the Presbyterian Church) theology "did not arise from the social existence of black people. On the contrary, its character was shaped by those who, sharing the consciousness of the Enlightenment, failed to question the consequences of the so-called enlightened view as reflected in the colonization and slavery of that period." Hence, Cone remarks that while it has often been asserted that the Enlightenment represents a revolution in the thinking and consciousness of Western man, it is crucial to remember that not all people are

[3] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, revised edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 13-14.

Western, or men. And that not all Western people experienced the Enlightenment in the same way. It has not been the liberating force that it has so often been portrayed to be. "For black and red peoples in North America, the spirit of Enlightenment was socially and politically demonic, becoming the pseudo-intellectual basis for their enslavement or extermination." In this context, American theologians from across the ideological spectrum from conservative to liberal have "interpreted the gospel according to the cultural and political interests of white people. They have rarely attempted to transcend the social interests of their group by seeking an analysis of the gospel in the light of the consciousness of black people struggling for liberation. White theologians, because of their identity with the dominant power structure, are largely boxed within their own cultural identity."[4]

In other words, it's not that white theologians have simply *intended* to serve the interests of their own particular constituency. Certainly this would be denied since it would be vigorously affirmed that the gospel is good news for all people. It means that white theologians have interpreted the gospel in terms of our own interests because we have too readily assumed that *our* cultural assumptions and interpretations of Christian faith are *the* cultural assumptions and interpretations of Christian faith. In this procedure the gospel is not only domesticated by the assumptions and interests of a particular group, but it is unwittingly and perversely turned into an instrument of oppression of other social and cultural people groups who do not participate in the social, political, and ideological "givens" of the dominant culture.

It is important to note here, that while the example we have mentioned concerns the relationship of the black perspective and experience for theology, the same questions have been raised by other social and ethnic communities. All have spoken of similar experiences in their

[4] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 42-43.

dealings with the dominant culture of White Christianity. At the end of the twentieth century, James Cone, quoting W. E. B. Du Bois, reminded us of the enduring nature of these questions for the present: "In 1903 W. E. B. Du Bois prophesied, 'The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,--the relation of the darker to the lighter races of [people] in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.' As we stand at the threshold of the next century, that remarkable prophesy is as relevant today as it was when Du Bois uttered it. The challenge for black theology in the twenty-first century is to develop an enduring race critique that is so comprehensively woven into Christian understanding that no one will be able to forget the horrible crimes of white supremacy in the modern world."[5] Here we simply add that these horrible crimes were often committed with the complicity of a culturally imprisoned white theology.

In addition to the question of the color-line is also the question of the gender-line. Feminist and Womanist historians, biblical scholars, and theologians have alerted us the cultural assumptions of male supremacy and the discrimination and horrible crimes committed against women often with the complicity of a culturally imprisoned male dominated theology. These concerns stretch across racial and ethnic boundaries as women in all cultural settings continue to experience the oppression, marginalization, and limitations that have been associated with gender discrimination.

Hopefully all will resonate with the criticisms raised concerning the dominant forms of Christianity as they have been developed and practiced in the contemporary setting. Perhaps many will also ask why, for instance, given the desire to promote racial reconciliation in the church as a witness in the world to the power of the gospel, it has been so hard to achieve. One

[5] James H. Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 137.

of the reasons for this state of affairs is related to the relative unwillingness of the those who are part of the dominant cultural frameworks and structures across the ideological spectrum to give serious attention to the voice of the other in disciplines like biblical studies, hermeneutics, and theology because of a particular conception of truth that allows for only one proper expression of it.

A particular understanding of theology or truth is developed and then taken to be universal and normative for all by those who framed it. When those who are not part of the contexts and communities that have a stake in the proposal on offer subject it to scrutiny and critique from their own experiences and vantage points, they are frequently accused of relativism or special interest approaches to theology and truth. In fact, *all* theologies and theories of truth are contextual and perspectival, none simply rise above the social conditions and particular interests from which they emerge. The danger of cultural hegemony is that those in the dominant culture, particularly if they ignore the voice of the other, will be tempted to conclude that their outlook is universal. And this conclusion will lead to the marginalization of those who do not share in the outlooks and assumptions of the dominant culture.

This presumption of universality is illustrated in the story of a North American white theologian who was invited to speak in Africa. After one of his lectures he was approached by an African theologian who asked why it was that when he spoke of theological reflection in South America he referred to it as *South American* theology, and in Asia as *Asian* theology, and in Africa as *African* theology, but referred to his own work simply as *theology*. This is a fairly obvious and straightforward point, and yet one that is easily missed. All theological reflection emerges from a particular location and is shaped by that setting. As finite creatures, we must surrender the pretensions of a universal and timeless theology. And where we are unwilling to do

this, we propagate forms of cultural, ethnic, and racial imperialism under the guise of theology and the Word of God. The failure to surrender these pretensions will continually hinder the hopes of racial reconciliation in the church because the Christian faith will continue to be defined in ways that are governed by the assumptions and outlooks characteristic of the white experience and its cultural hegemony. True reconciliation cannot be achieved on these terms.

In reflecting on listening to the voice of the other, it is important to remember that the "other" is never monolithic as can be suggested by phrases such as White Theology, Black Theology, Hispanic Theology, Feminist Theology and the like. All of these are characterized by their own plurality that emerges from their particular perspectives. While we are often very aware of the nuances and pluralities of our own traditions, we can often fall prey to viewing others in a simplistic homogenous way that easily allows us to dismiss them and assume our cultural superiority. This way of "listening" to the voice of the other can become simply another mechanism linked to the exercise of power and control.

It is also important to note that the voices of these various traditions of theological reflection are not simply to be seen as serving merely their own particular communities. Hence, we must not think that Black Theology is only for Black people, Hispanic Theology for Hispanics, Feminist and Womanist theology for women, etc. These theologies, while particularly attentive to the experiences of specific communities and constituencies, are for the whole church. They must inform the thought of all if we are to bear witness to the truth of the gospel and the unity of the church, the Body of Jesus Christ. While Christian theology always arises out of particular social and historical experiences and contexts, its intent is to serve the whole church precisely by bearing witness from the particularity of those experiences and perspectives to the truth of the gospel on behalf of the whole. Taking seriously the witness of the Other in the task of

proclamation and theology means listening attentively to the voices of those who have been marginalized and ignored in the hegemonic forms of traditional western theological discourse.

In imagining what this might look like we can envision what Justo González describes as Christian theology done at "at the ethnic roundtable." He summarizes the work of a group that undertook such a project in *Out of Every Tribe and Nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable* in which ethnic minority theologians gathered together to examine the various topics of traditional theology from their own perspectives, and to "enter into dialogue with each other and with traditional theology, seeking a better and deeper understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ."[6] He describes the book as a celebration of discovery in which the participants shared lively and exciting theological discussions that produced the experience of theological discovery in the midst of their diversity. In addition, they experienced the pleasure of discovering each other as they shared and came to understand one another's hopes and pains as well as the faith that animated their lives. The book is intended as an invitation to its readers to both celebrate and share in the discovery of the participants of the group. It is a discovery that is vital for the witness of the gospel in our society.

Yet, as González observes, the task is not easy, because in the world and in the church "powerful forces arrayed against such a discovery. There are the forces of inertia, parochialism, and racism, which push people in our society to stay among others 'of their own kind.' And there are the forces of self-interest, for a true discovery would force us to deal more justly with one another." Nevertheless this is the task to which the God of mission has called the church in order represent the image of God in the world as a witness to the character of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. The difficulty of this calling is that it "goes against the grain of our imbedded

[6] Justo L. González, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 15.

cultural racism, against many of our own self-interests, and against much of the current political trend. But God has never called the church to easy tasks…It is the tasks that the world deems impossible that most appropriately belong to the church. If so, the task of promoting a new and mutual discovery among the peoples of this earth is certainly the task of the church."[7]

The witness of the other must be discovered and prioritized in the church as theology done at the ethnic roundtable in order to provide both a witness against and an alternative to the racism and tribalism that permeate life in the world. In order for this vision to be fully realized a particular challenge must be embraced by those of us who represent the hegemonic forms of theology that have served to marginalize the other in the church as well as in the schools and seminaries where so many traditional Christian leaders are trained. We must be willing to subject the dominant theological traditions and intellectual assumptions of the Western church to critical scrutiny and intentionally decenter them in relation to other voices and traditions. We must assume a place at the ethnic roundtable along with all the other participants, with the particular responsibility of assuming the posture of a learner rather than that of a teacher. We must be willing to give up the assumption of self-supposed theological and intellectual supremacy and be prepared to listen rather than to speak.

In so doing we will be in a position to receive the witness of the other and be liberated from the cultural imperialism that has served to deafen us to the voices of so many and blind us to the work of God. This is particularly a challenge for those who represent the dominant streams of theological reflection because of the power differential that exists between these traditions and those outside of the dominant streams. In order to promote the Spirit guided flourishing of plurality in the church, those with power must be willing to both make use of it in such a way

[7] González, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation*, 15.

that allows for the witness of the Other to be realized in the life of the church and to relinquish power for the sake of the gospel.

While this task of decentering the dominant strands of the Western theological tradition will be difficult and often painful to those of us who have been formed and privileged by them, such a process is necessary for the witness of the church to the character of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, for the sake of the gospel and the community that is called to bear living witness to it we must in humility consider the interests and concerns of others before our own in keeping with the example of the Lord of the Church, "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant" (Phil. 2:6-8).

That this is a matter of utmost importance for the witness of the gospel stems from the fact that the plurality of the church is not simply a fact, but is also the very intention of God. As González concludes: "Simply and boldly stated, what this means is that the opposite of a pluralistic church and a pluralistic theology is not simply an exclusivistic church and a rigid theology, but a heretical church and a heretical theology!"[8]

[8] González, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation*, 25-26.