

This Is the Day the Lord Has Made

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

This is the day the Lord has made;
He calls the hours His own;
let heav'n rejoice, let earth be glad,
and praise surround the throne.

Today he rose and left the dead,
and Satan's empire fell;
today the saints His triumphs spread,
and all His wonders tell.

Hosanna to th'anointed King,
to David's holy Son.
help us, O LORD, descend and bring
salvation from Your throne.

Blest be the Lord, who comes to us
with messages of grace;
who comes, in God His Father's name,
to save our sinful race.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Theological Education and the Christian Life

Matt Shrader

In the previous essay I explained three areas in which nineteenth-century Baptist theologian Alvah Hovey provided some help in thinking through the nature and place of theological education. One of these was the idea that theology itself is the master and those who study it are to be mastered by it. In Hovey's mind, theological education ought not, and cannot, be divorced from the Christian life. It cannot be confined to seminary study alone.

Theological education cannot be confined to seminary because it is by nature a lifelong endeavor. Formal theological education produces a base out of which further study ought to grow. Hovey was aware that not every pastor can attain formal education, and, in some cases, it did not hinder great ministries. John Bunyan, Andrew Fuller, and Charles Spurgeon fall into this category. However, these men had exceptional minds and engaged in lifelong self-education by which they attained, in a roundabout fashion, the recommended theological education. In certain other cases, such as men who receive a call to ministry later in life, theological education is certainly more difficult though still preferable.

In another sense, theological education is part and parcel of the Christian life because there is always an element of mystery or partial knowledge to the practice of theology. This is the distinction between archetypal and ectypal knowledge. Archetypal is the knowledge that God has of himself and ectypal is our derivative understanding of God that we have because of God's self-revelation and the Spirit's work of regeneration and illumination. Hovey admitted that "partial knowledge is all we can now have in matters of religion. And it is wholesome for us to bear this in mind as we investigate doctrines of surpassing interest" (Hovey, "Character Tested by Religious Inquiry," 508). Mystery is not a reason to abandon the study of theology; rather, the recognition of such mystery is requisite to the study of theology.

Beyond the Creator-creature distinction is the fact that there are limitations to learning and reason. Human reasoning ability is a God-given faculty to be used even though it is limited. Studying theology comes with mental, moral, religious, and educational qualifications. Each is important, each relates to the others, and a lack in one is a detriment to others. Hovey's



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guiding principle was that theological study is a continual spiritual exercise directed toward seeking the face of God. When speaking about the “religious” qualification of a theological student, Hovey simply stated that, “We must love divine things in order to know them” (Hovey, *Manual of Christian Theology*, 9).

The person who would study theology and effectively minister has an important task. Hovey’s summary of this is pointed and instructive: “He must be one who clings, not to human speculation or intuition, but to revealed truth, which is sure, and worthy of all acceptance. He must be, not a rationalist, who leans to his own understanding, nor a mystic, who surrenders himself to the impulses of his own fancy or feeling, but an educated Christian, who knows and love, and retains with the grasp of *intelligent faith*, that system of truth which was taught by Christ and his apostles” (Hovey, “Preparation for the Christian Ministry,” 440). In another place Hovey calls this same requirement *intelligent piety*. I hope what Hovey was driving at is becoming clear. Due to the nature of the theological exercise and the limitations of humanity, the personal abilities that ought to accompany someone who studies the things of God extends to the whole person.

In the final examination, theological education contains an inherent warning to the Christian. Hovey felt that God tested the theological student in his reverence, his faith, and his hope. Reverence is tested because the vast difference between God and humanity means the student should never think too much of himself in comparison to God and his judgments. Faith is tested by study because the limitations of reason mean the Christian must have a fearful and loving trust in God and his Word when doubt and difficulty come. Hope is tested because though we are limited in the here and now, “the time will come when we shall no longer see through a glass darkly, but face to face, when we shall no longer know in part, but shall even know as we are known” (Hovey, “Character Tested by Religious Inquiry,” 511). Character is tested by theological study.

The connection between theological education and the Christian life is essential. We must love God in order to know God and we must know God in order to love God. Hovey’s warning that the failure to comprehend the ways of God will test our faith should not be lost. The difficulty of theology and the limitations of our study are not to hold us back. Rather, they direct us toward God.

Ministry, whether vocational or not, is complex. Hence, the skills and knowledge needed to effectively minister are also complex. Theological education has an essential place even though it has (and we have) definite limitations. These should keep us from pride and pontification. But they should not cripple us through fear and reticence. We are all expected to

minister, which assumes some level of theological education. Done well, this should drive us to our knees.

Hovey’s view of the study of theology as a spiritual exercise agrees with much of the heritage of the church. Those of us living in the twenty-first century would do well to pursue God similarly through the study of theology. Conversely, we should never, and really can never, study theology properly without simultaneously pursuing God. At its best, theological education helps develop ministerial capacity. More importantly, it leads the student to seek the face of God.



This essay is by Matt Shrader, Director of Recruitment and Retention and Assistant Professor of Church History at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
