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St. Margaret's Episcopal Church

Why Theology?

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall understand fully, even as I have been understood.

I was in Florida last month for a meeting, during which a consultant asked each of the participants to share our personal and professional goals.

Here's what I said.

My professional goals are:

1. To become an influential and helpful expert in the field of theology and science; and:
2. To build the Institute for Theological Studies at St. Margaret's into an important and influential center of growth and education for the church.

Goal number 1 is driving me crazy. Goal number 2 pertains to you. What is this "institute" you hear of from time to time?

Our Vicar, Peggy put the idea in front of me several years ago when she invited me to return and help St. Margaret's fulfill its promise as a congregation. It's only one part of an increasingly rich St. Margaret's story, but I believe it will become an important contributor to our common life.

I see the Institute as an engine for St. Margaret's growth, as a weighty theological presence in Little Rock, as a resource for the intellectual and spiritual vitality of the Episcopal Church at large. We'll practice good communications and marketing. We'll generate audio-visual, print, and web-productions. We'll conduct day-time programs for mothers and retirees, offer evening lectures, sponsor weekend conferences and seminars, lead retreats and pilgrimage excursions. So get ready.

But here is a question for you. When you hear "Institute for Theological Studies..." what connotations does the word "theological" carry for you? That's what I was afraid of...

Richard Dawkins, our leading global village atheist, makes sure his readers know what Thomas Jefferson thought of priests and theologians.¹

“The priests of the different religious sects,” said Jefferson, “dread the advance of science as witches do the approach of daylight, and scowl on the fatal harbinger announcing the subdivision of the duperies on which they live.”

Jefferson decreed that “a Professorship of Theology should have no place” in his new University of Virginia.

So what is theological study (banned in Charlottesville!) that would make it worth your time? Or mine, beyond my salary... which is zero. I suspect you’re going to have to all start buying your automobiles with those Kroger cards before St. Margaret’s will have enough money to pay for a full time theologian.

Aquinas called it the “science of God,” the intellectual activity “whereby saving faith is begotten, nourished, protected, strengthened.”²

Maybe when you hear that, it occurs to you to wonder: “What does he mean by ‘saving faith.’ Is there a faith that doesn’t save? Can salvation come by another way than faith? How does faith save us, and from what?” When you begin to entertain those questions, you become a theologian.

Let’s chew for a moment on what St. Paul tells the Corinthians about love. “It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things,” he tells us. And... “it never ends.”

Love never ends? For real? Just imagine what’s at stake in that particular theological proposal. Just consider the implications in Paul’s allegation that there is a Spirit from Above which is manifest here and now among us as a more-than-natural love. Love of this kind is in itself a basis for belief, hope and endurance through life’s travails, and at its end when this Spirit greets us as a familiar friend.

Don’t we all have a huge part of our hearts vested in this being not a duperly, but true? And are not belief, hope and endurance in love through life’s travails, a way that faith is saving? I certainly think so. In faith, Christ saves us from hopelessness and lovelessness today, and at the end from annihilation.

Paul joins his theological claim about love to one about knowledge. It’s a warning. He cautions us not to be too proud of our theological opinions, because even in saving faith our knowledge now is less than perfect. “We see through the glass darkly.” Gregory of Nyssa taught that theology and prayer are how the Christian learns to “see in darkness.”

This brings me to suggest where I think we’ll make our contribution. The world is full of institutes – conservative, liberal or avant-garde – we might well be better off without. What kind of influence would I hope for us to have? In other words: what is the agenda?

We’ve known each other for a long time, so this answer won’t surprise you. I see our “theological presence” as deeply classical, with a little bit of cutting edge.

When I say “cutting edge” I’m thinking particularly of the teaching we can do in theology and science.

Here’s a case in point. While here in Little Rock last month, our new Presiding Bishop was asked how her training as a biologist fits with her faith as a Christian. She replied that science is how we learn about the world, “what’s out there.” Religion tells us what it means. That answer seemed to satisfy the audience, but you as a theologian might want to probe a little further. Does saving faith not have to do with what’s “out there” too? Surely, it does. Our institute can push us to think on that beyond the battles in the courts and slogans in the press. I believe that we can make a real contribution on a puzzling issue... unless I end up in a straightjacket first.

When I say “classical” I’m thinking of how we can draw on the great learning of the church’s long tradition for a spiritual wisdom and intellectual acuity that rises above the typical red state/blue state style of back and forth between the Bishop Spongs and Pat Dobsons of this world.

Here’s a case in point. Why are we still stuck on the liberal-fundamentalist division on the authority of scripture? That old divide underlies today’s quarrels over the ethics of same sex affection, as well as religion and science. In both cases here’s the issue: to what extent do we judge modern viewpoints by the ancient light of scripture — or, conversely — ancient viewpoints by the modern light of science, experience and reason.

It helps us to see that this is a classical dilemma, not a new one.

A group of seventeenth century theologians sometimes called the “Caroline Divines,” suffered through the period when the logical nub at bottom of that issue so vexed England that it fueled a civil war.

Does the Bible over-rule the church? That’s what puritans and pilgrims believed back then, as fundamentalists believe today, because how can human beings judge the Word of God? But from the other side: Could God not hold a new Word for a time when the church needs or is ready to receive it? That’s what Catholic Christians then, and liberal-minded Christians now, have answered. Neither side is faithless, neither side is brainless, then or now.

The Caroline Divines took a middle position then, with an insight that can reassure and guide us now.

They discerned that to set the authority of church and scripture in opposition is misguided, because the authority of each is embedded in the other. Look to scripture, and you find that authority for the church to consider new questions or reconsider old ones in light of new developments is spelled out there in no uncertain terms. (See Acts 15.) On the other hand, the church exists only in and for its witness to the truth and love of God in Jesus Christ, and without the Bible it is powerless to give any shape and

content to this witness. She is a ship with no map or compass, guided by its own whims. She zigs, she zags, she sails in circles.

Is the Bible humanly fallible, as Bishop Spong has made a career of calling to the world's attention — or rather divinely perfect, as many of us were taught as children. To answer that, the Caroline Divines point to what is meant by “saving faith.” They saw so clearly that God's purpose in and through the gospel is to make human beings good, by making us more like him... like God.

The Bible is tuned to that objective. What do we as human beings need to live up to the full measure of our share of the goodness given us by God? We need both evidence, they said, and exercise. Evidence: light to guide us on the way, and exercise: enough obscurity to make us develop and use all the skills and tools of discernment that come with the privilege and responsibility of bearing God's image in the world.

This is the classic Anglican position. Yes, the Bible is divinely perfect — perfect for the purposes that God has intended it to serve. And yes, it is human and therefore fallible as well, because its human limitations belong to this perfection. For through them God draws us to exercise our powers of spiritual discernment and scientific reason.³

We have to *learn*, to see.

¹ These remarks by Jefferson are quoted in Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*.

² From the opening section of *Summa Theologia*. Aquinas is quoting Augustine.

³ For “evidence and exercise” see George Herbert. For the scripture's perfection in relation to its end, see Richard Hooker. I've given Hooker a reading in light of William Temple.