

CLASSICAL THEOLOGY: A SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

By Matthew Barrett¹

The contemplation of God is promised us as being the goal of all our actions and the everlasting perfection of all our joys. — Augustine

Abstract: *If theology is not only taught by God and of God but leads to God—as Francis Turretin said summarizing Thomas Aquinas—then theology is the contemplation of God, in part now but in full at the beatific vision. Theological theology begins and ends with David’s desire to behold the beauty of the Lord (Ps. 27:4), yet that telos requires the sanctification of the theologian’s theology. Such a pilgrimage is an ascent into understanding itself, an understanding that participates in divine wisdom. However, classical theology insists that apart from the ladder of faith the theologian will not understand. As Anselm said, *credo ut intelligam*. Classical theology, therefore, is a spiritual exercise. As a spiritual exercise, contemplation produces consecration. And according to the apostle John the hope of partaking in the divine nature through the beatific vision should galvanize ecclesiastical sanctity in the present. On the basis of Paul’s Trinitarian eschatology, the classical theologian is entrusted with the pastoral mission of consecrating the people of God by means of contemplation. That ecclesiastical mission requires a Thomistic (as opposed to Aristotelian) magnanimity that is accompanied by a self-forgetfulness before the face of God (*coram Deo*).*

Key Words: Contemplation, Consecration, Ascent, Beatific Vision, Anselm, Aquinas, Turretin, Classical theology

Ecclesiology in The Kingdom of Theology Proper

As he surveyed the landscape of theology in the last century, John Webster lamented modern theology’s redefinition and relocation of God.² No longer considered *a se*, God was constituted by history, even changed by its course of events—a being in the process of becoming. Once God was redefined according to the contours of history, relocation followed: “God in himself,” reported Webster, drifted “to the periphery of theological concerns.”³ Not without irony, theology

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³John Webster, *God Without Measure* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2016), 215.

lost its *theological* ethos.⁴ Theology could no longer be trusted to itself, but to justify its relevance to history theology had to be postured for the sake of other disciplines—theology *and* public discourse, theology *and* politics, theology *and* social ethics, etc.⁵ Theology as *theologia* was not taken seriously and as a result classical theism's pedigree of contemplation was not either. For contemplation—in part now, in full by the eschaton—moves beyond history's economy to gaze at the beauty of God in and of himself, a God who deserves to be enjoyed for his own sake.

It is no exaggeration to claim that a good deal of modern theology has been reluctant to consider contemplation a proper end of theological intelligence. The marks of this reluctance are not difficult to find. It may be seen, for example, in the remarkable prestige enjoyed by literary-historical science in the study of Holy Scripture; or in presentations of Christian doctrine which are devoid of metaphysical ambition and treat dogma as ancillary to the science of Christian practice which is first theology. The assumption (sometimes explicitly articulated conviction) in both cases is that only the historical is the real, that intellect can extend itself no further than the economy of texts or moral practices. It is an impatient assumption, but one which has proved remarkably adept in shaping the purposes with which theological study is undertaken. Its elimination of the contemplative is an inhibition of theology's theological character.⁶

Webster may be describing the life (or death) of theology in the academy, but his lament is apropos for ecclesiology as well. A theologian who is honest will be transparent enough to express both lament and hope when considering the relationship between *theologia* and ecclesiology. Lament is understandable. What theologian can deny that the church is often indifferent, sometimes even hostile, to the expertise of the theologian? The reason for apathy and enmity: the people of God do not always consider the task of theology itself central to the life of the church. And theology is not considered central to the life of the church because theology is not considered practical. *Is theology relevant?* is often the first question denoted to terminate *theologia* in the presence of God's people.

Yet as long as the church—or the academy—measures its receptivity to

⁴ See Webster's essay, "Theological Theology," in *T&T Clark Reader in John Webster*, ed. Michael Allen (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 21–42. Also consider his essay, "Biblical Reasoning," in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 115–32.

⁵ Webster, *God Without Measure*, 220.

⁶ Webster, *God Without Measure*, 220.

theology on the basis of relevancy, theology will always be held in suspicion, at least the theology of classical Christianity. For classical theology believes that the transcendental components of the Christian faith should not be moved to the periphery; indeed, they are foundational to history. Thomas Aquinas is right to insist that theology is “*more theoretical than practical, since it is mainly concerned with the divine things, which are, rather than with things men do.*” Theology “*deals with human acts only in so far as they prepare men for that achieved knowledge of God on which their eternal bliss reposes.*”⁷ And yet, even the mention of eternal bliss moves a theologian like Thomas to the conclusion that theology’s theoretical nature bears the fruit of practical science. “*Now in so far as sacred doctrine is a practical science, its aim is eternal happiness, and this is the final end governing the ends of all the practical sciences.*”⁸ Reformed scholastics since have followed the lead of Thomas. In a Johannine vein, William Perkins writes, “*Theologie is the science of living blessedly forever. Blessed life ariseth from the knowledge of God [Jn. 17:3].*”⁹

In that light, classical theology defined its enterprise as the contemplation of God and then all things in relation to God.¹⁰ That posture is fitting for classical theology which delineates the creature by means of *participation* in the Creator. Simple and *a se*, infinite and immense, God’s existence is his essence, but those who have been made in his likeness are composite.¹¹ He, therefore, is the fountain of life—in him we live and move and have our being, as Paul said quoting the Greeks (Acts 17:28). In a participation paradigm, how then can theology be anything but theological? From creation to incarnation, the wondrous works of God in the economy—*oikonomia*—are not an end in themselves but a means to contemplate God in himself—the holy Trinity.¹² “*God and creatures are incommensurable,*” clarifies Webster. “*Theology proper precedes and governs*

⁷Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), I.1.5. Hereafter ST.

⁸ST I.1.5.

⁹William Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, p. 11, col. 1, in *Works* (Cambridge, 1612–19), vol. I; quoted in Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:155. Peter van Mastricht gives the means to that end in his definition of theology: “*Christian theology is nothing less than the doctrine of living for God through Christ, in other words, the doctrine that is according to godliness.*” Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Heritage Books, 2018), 1:98.

¹⁰E. g., Aquinas, ST II–II.180.2.

¹¹As Thomas says, “*the existence of God is his essence.*” ST I.13.11.

¹²Gregory of Nazianzus, *Select Orations* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), especially *Orations* 38.

economy.”¹³

Assuming Webster’s privilege of theology proper is correct, this essay speaks to our present ecclesiastical moment in time as an opportunity for the theologian to consider how he or she should summon the church to the preeminence of *theologia* and its contemplation of God. David’s words in Psalm 27:4 should not only define the task of theology but reposition the posture of the church today.¹⁴ The king of Israel set his mind to many pious, even practical implementations of the Law of God (Ps. 19:7–14), yet David was consumed by one passion:

One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.
To behold the beauty of the Lord.
And to meditate in His Temple.

Gazing at the beauty of the Lord is the premier ambition of the theologian, but the theologian’s task is incomplete if his heavenly gaze is for himself alone. David’s one desire may be personal, but as the rest of the psalms indicate, the king expects his one petition to be on the lips of all God’s people (e.g., consider a psalm of ascent, such as Psalm 132). The corporate nature of contemplation means the theologian bears pastoral responsibility for summoning the people of God to behold the beauty of the Lord, a spiritual exercise that will reach its culmination in the beatific vision itself.

The priority of contemplation may be foreign to contemporary ecclesiology, which is tempted to operate in isolation from *theologia*. However, ecclesiology does not and should not enjoy an independent existence in dogmatics; ecclesiology lives and moves and has its being only in so far as it depends upon and *participates* in theology proper. The church exists by the word of God, as exemplified from the call of Abraham to the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost. The church is no ordinary assembly but has been chosen by God in Christ from eternity and born from above by his Word and Spirit. Created by God, the church is true to itself when she lives as if that same God is the fountain of her life, the same life she extends to the world. By fixing her gaze on the beauty of the Lord, the same Lord who assumed flesh for the sake of his bride’s beautification, she extends

¹³Webster, *God Without Measure*, 8. And again, “The material order—God in himself, God’s external work, created things—is irreversible, because created things are comprehensible only as effects of God’s external operations, and those operations are in turn comprehensible only as they are seen to flow from God’s perfect beatitude and simplicity” (215).

¹⁴I will explore this methodological concern more in my forthcoming *Systematic Theology* with Baker Academic.

the gospel to a world otherwise obsessed with staring at its navel. Ecclesiology detached from theology proper is narcissism, and narcissism is the beginning and the end of idolatry.

Yet the church's inception is not the only reason for optimism. As long as the church is our mother, we can rest assured that her husband is Christ, the same Christ who has promised to return with spoils of victory in the eschaton. The philosophy that serves as a handmaid to classical theology—namely, classical realism—is notable for its defense of final causality. To exist in a world without God as the First Cause is to exist in a world without purpose, without hope, without eschatology. Transferred to ecclesiology, the principle is full of import: the church will drink from the well of contemplation if the soul of the church is defined not only by its present but future *telos*, which is nothing less than doxology. The church exists and operates within God's economy as saints forming an embassy of praise—from redemption to restoration, from union to communion, from consecration to contemplation.

In light of that *telos*, the apostle John can end his first letter with a warning—little children, keep yourself from idols—because idolatry is a failure to keep a steady gaze. David longs to behold the beauty of the Lord because he understands that outside God's temple are many idols that threaten to interrupt and disrupt his theological vision, many lesser beauties that pretend to be equal substitutes for the beauty of the Infinite. Knowing how prone the church can be towards idolatrous distraction, Thomas Aquinas placed significant hope in the beatific vision. The beatific vision ushers the church into the fullness of divine happiness because at last the church's gaze will not be interrupted by a rivalry of lesser goods. God "promises us complete happiness [in heaven] . . . for then by a single, uninterrupted and continuous act our minds will be united with God. In the meantime, in so far as we fall short of that lasting unity, so far do we fall short of perfect bliss. All the same we can already have some share in it, and so much the greater as our activity grows more single-minded and less distracted."¹⁵ Thomas was a spiritual theologian with no little insight into the "active life" and its many spiritual effects in the life of the church.¹⁶ However, "the active life, which is occupied with many things, has less of the nature of happiness than the contemplative life, which revolves round one thing, the gazing at truth."¹⁷

¹⁵ ST I–II.3.2.

¹⁶ See especially Jean-Pierre Torell, *Spiritual Master*, volume 1 of *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006).

¹⁷ ST I–II.3.2. Space does not permit me to explore Thomas's extensive treatment of the contemplative life and active life (but see my forthcoming *Systematic Theology* with Baker Academic). Thomas does not limit contemplation to the intellect but includes the will. The intellect must be moved by

The theologian is responsible for this sacred, spiritual trust: to sustain the church's gaze so that it does not waver from contemplating the beauty of the Lord. In that light, the theologian bent on servicing the church with a *theological* theology will discover he is pressed with a pastoral responsibility to keep the church postured towards its bride—what Thomas called a “simple gaze.” That sacred trust is holy. For contemplation is not only the *telos* of the church but the means to ecclesiastical sanctity, a point we will revisit. The theologian is called to be God's instrument of consecration in the church, never ceasing to refine the church's knowledge of God in Christ to prepare his church to see the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Credo ut Intelligam: The Humility of Contemplation

The novice theologian could hear this call to be an instrument in God's hands for the sake of ecclesiastical consecration and contemplation, and run with zeal to be the gatekeeper, but neglect the Spirit's sanctification within his own theology. By consequence, the theologian fails to bring his theology to culmination because he has never become a shepherd of his own soul. The theologian pursues the wisdom of the intellect, the holiness of the will, and the good ordering of his affections when he first submits himself to the pastoral consolation and admonition of the Holy Spirit to be effective in the renewal of the church.¹⁸

To begin with, consider the *intellect*. Sanctification is often segregated to Christian living, but ectypeal theology is a form of sanctification too, the Holy Spirit's progressive consecration of the theologian's contemplative ascent.¹⁹ If true, then systematic theology may be distinguished from pastoral theology but never severed. For theology is nothing less than the renewal of the mind. Paul's imperative to be transformed by the renewal of the mind (Rom. 12:2) may be a stumbling block. Those with the keys to higher education should not give the

the will, which means contemplation involves love itself. Thomas is persuaded the church fathers agree. “Gregory [the Great] makes the contemplative life consist in the love of God, since through loving him we are aflame to gaze on his beauty. . . . The love of God impels us to the vision of the first principle, who is God” (ST II–II.180.1). Therefore, when love has that which it loves (God), delight follows. Do the moral virtues factor into the contemplative life? Thomas's answer is twofold: virtues “do not have the essential part, because the goal of the contemplative life is the consideration of truth.” Yet they “do have their place in the contemplative life as dispositions.” Thomas calls virtue a motive cause in the will and motive causes “do not enter into the essence of a thing, though they prepare for it and complete it” (ST II–II.180.2).

¹⁸For all three (mind, will, affections), consult Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 1.5.10.

¹⁹I make this same point in, “Who Says? Solving Doctrinal Controversy,” *Modern Reformation* 31, no. 4 (2022): 42–51.

impression that the conclusion of one's theological degree—even the Doctor of Philosophy—is the eschaton, the complete purgation of theological imperfection and immaturity. As if the newly minted intellect has conquered the doctrinal terrain. That impression will lead fools to rush in, as if they can now speak to any and every doctrinal dominion and controversy. In truth, the doctorate is not so much a test of comprehensive knowledge of God (an academic mindset that betrays classical theism's commitment to the incomprehensibility of God), but a trial to determine whether the budding theologian has the theological tools to properly approach God in whatever doctrinal sphere he encounters. In other words, the achievement of a theological degree is the beginning, not the end, of the mind's theological sanctification, ensuring the theologian is facing the right direction as he begins the ancient pilgrimage of theological ascent. If the theologian can adjust to that mindset—the outlook of a pilgrimage (1 Pet. 2:1)—then and only then will he understand that thinking theologically is a path for wayfarers. Therefore, the path of the theologian must be paved by a progressive sanctity rather than an instantaneous glory.²⁰

Some wayfarers at the bottom of this mountain may become discouraged at the elevation that awaits their ascent. What theologian's theology on paper lives up to the theology he knows is good, true, and beautiful in the minds of his theological forefathers? Yet despair in this case may be easily disguised pride. Not all but many theologians who have weathered the sanctifying process of their own theological mountains will admit they took a misguided path at some point along the way. A theologian as impeccable as Augustine, for example, wrote an entire book of revisions as he reflected on his theological life.²¹ Augustine was unembarrassed because he understood that progression, as painful as it may be, is the only way to theological holiness.

The progressive sanctification of the theologian's theology, however, is impossible apart from *humility*. Humility is a virtue no theologian can afford to forfeit. Few exemplify such humility in their theological method like Anselm, the father of scholasticism during the High Middle Ages. Those who caricature scholasticism as a proud speculation have not met the theologian of Canterbury. As his *Proslogion* prepared to set sail to ride some of the tallest waves of theology proper, Anselm began with a prayer.

I acknowledge, Lord, and I give thanks that You have created Your image in me, so that I may remember You, think of You, love You.

²⁰Aquinas, *ST II-II.180.2*.

²¹Augustine, *Revisions* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2010).

But this image is so effaced and worn away by vice, so darkened by the smoke of sin, that it cannot do what it was made to do unless You renew it and reform it. I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe, but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also, that “unless I believe, I shall not understand” [Isa. 7:9].²²

Not a few historians have observed the variegated ways some modern theologians presumed they could withhold belief until the intellect finished scrutinizing the received theology of the church.²³ By contrast, the scholastic theologian of the High Middle Ages was confident he could not understand unless God himself grants him *faith* to believe. *Credo ut intelligam*. As Anselm explains at the beginning of *On the Incarnation of the Word*, the theologian requires “spiritual wings through the solidity of faith” to contemplate with accuracy and fidelity doctrines like the Trinity. If novice theologians “foolishly try to ascend intellectually to those things that first need the ladder of faith,” they will “sink into many kinds of errors by reason of the deficiency of their intellect.” For Anselm, the failure of intellectual ascent is not unrelated to the absence of mature *fiducia*, or what Reformed scholastics called faithful apprehension (*apprehensio fiducialis*).²⁴ “For they evidently do not have the strength of faith who, since they cannot understand the things they believe, argue against the same faith’s truth confirmed by the holy Fathers.”²⁵ Appealing to Acts 15:9 and Psalm 19:8, Anselm insists God must cleanse the heart by faith and illumine the eyes first. The theologian must become a little child “humbly obeying the testimonies of God,” acquiring wisdom by believing in the trustworthy testimony of the Lord (Ps. 19:7). For God hides his revelation from the wise, those who consider themselves clever, but he unveils

²²Anselm, *Proslogion* 1, in *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

²³For the origins of this modern outlook, see Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009). To see how this outlook resulted in what Thomas Joseph White calls the “Modern God,” see his *The Trinity: On the Nature and Mystery of the One God* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 32–49. Also consult the critique of modern revisionism by Lewis Ayres, *The Legacy of Nicaea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 384–429; Stephen Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (InterVarsity Press, 2012), 1–32, 165–200.

²⁴Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), s.v.

²⁵Anselm worries that “they argue against the same faith’s truth confirmed by the holy Fathers.” *On the Incarnation of the Word* 1, in *The Major Works*.

his word to little ones (Matt. 11:25).²⁶

Faith, for Anselm, produces obedience, and obedience to the voice of God in sacred Scripture is a necessary, even if preliminary step, in satisfying the theologian's hunger for understanding. "For it is a fact that the more powerfully sacred Scripture nourishes us with things that feed us by obedience, the more acutely we are drawn to things that satisfy us intellectually."²⁷ With intellectual satisfaction as the prize, the obedience of faith is a non-negotiable for Anselm, which leads him to issue this warning at the start of his *On the Incarnation of the Word*:

And not only is the mind without faith and obedience to the commandments of God prevented from rising to understand higher things, but the mind's endowed understanding is also sometimes taken away, and faith itself subverted, when upright conscience is neglected. . . . Therefore, no one should rashly plunge into the complex things involved in questions about God unless the person first have a solid faith with the precious weight of character and wisdom, lest a persistent falsity ensnare the person who runs with careless levity through many little diverting sophisms.²⁸

The scholasticism of Anselm embodies an Augustinian spirit, as exemplified when he inaugurates and concludes many of his discourses humble enough to acknowledge his weakness, knowing that such intellectual honesty could only lead him further up and further in. In a Platonic vein, Anselm is convinced theology is a type of *ascent*—requiring what he labels the "ladder of faith."²⁹ His theological posture, therefore, displays a perpetual reliance on the grace of God both for theology's inception and its culmination.

If theology involves ascent—the ladder of faith—then the theologian must not resist the instrumentality of a progressive sanctity in the acquisition of understanding and all the wisdom it promises. After contemplating the heights of divinity, Anselm's *Proslogion* finishes with this prayer:

I pray, O God, that I may know You and love You, so that I may rejoice in You. And if I cannot do so fully in this life may I *progress gradually*

²⁶ Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 1.

²⁷ Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 1.

²⁸ Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 1.

²⁹ Many of the church fathers and medieval scholastics appealed to Jacob's ladder in Genesis 28. E.g., Gregory, *Homil. In Ezech.* II, hom. 2; PL 76, 953; referenced in Aquinas, *ST* II-II.180.7.

until it comes to fullness.³⁰

To progress gradually is Anselm's grammar for the sanctification of the theological mind. Anselm's prayers reveal a posture in which the theologian takes to his knees as he begins and ends his task. Apart from such humility, the theologian will not grow in his knowledge of the Infinite, nor will his knowledge of the Infinite undergo purification. His thoughts will remain either shallow or corruptible, or both. Proverbs offers the antidote to theological hubris: the "fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge . . . and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight" (1:7; 9:10).

The young theologian gripped by the fear of the Lord may question whether he should think theologically out loud at all, joining the chorus of public discourse. Certainly, as Anselm warned, caution should be exercised whenever one dares to speak about the Incomprehensible, let alone on his behalf. However, paralysis may sound like humility when it is truly pride in the form of faintheartedness. It is one thing for a theologian to lack the skills of theological reasoning, but quite another for a theologian to lack the courage to put his hands to work. Crippled by an over realized eschatology, this theologian assumes he cannot think God's thoughts after him unless he can judge his own contribution perfect to begin with. He assumes, however unwitting his assumption may be, that his theology is not an ectype but the archetype itself.

Kelly Kacic, drawing on the insight of Thomas Aquinas, writes, "pride ignores God as the giver of one's mind and skills, while humility gratefully employs these gifts as an expression of worship and as a way to help others."³¹ The theologian bound by the pride of paralysis may mask his cognitive inactivity with humility, but he refuses to employ the gifts God has given to him in service of the church. He thinks humility is antithetical to magnanimity, but such an assumption plays by the rules of Aristotle not Aquinas. "G.K. Chesterton compares Aristotle's magnanimous man 'who is great and knows that he is great' with Aquinas's view of the 'miracle of the more magnanimous man, who is great and knows that he is small.'"³² The theologian who façades his faintheartedness with humility is just as contemptuous. In the words of Thomas, "A man clings too much to his own opinion whereby he thinks himself incompetent for those things

³⁰"Let the knowledge of You grow in me here, and there [in heaven] be made complete; let Your love grow in me here and there be made complete, so that here my joy may be great in hope, and there be complete in reality." Anselm, *Proslogion* 26.

³¹Kelly Kacic, *You're Only Human: How Your Limits Reflect God's Design and Why That's Good News* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2022), 105.

³²Kacic, *You're Only Human*, 105.

for which he is competent.”³³

Thomas does not deny that a theologian must be competent; fools rush in for a reason and they never look so foolish than when dabbling with uninformed thoughts about God. However, assuming competence is in place, the theologian who “clings too much to his own opinion” insults God’s intelligence by his neglect of the gifts God has given to him for the sake of his church. God has given not only apostles, prophets, and evangelists, but shepherds and teachers, says the apostle Paul to the Ephesians. The reason is selfless: “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine . . .” (Eph. 4:12–14).

In the mind of the apostle, theology becomes a spiritual exercise when the theologian sails past those thrashing waves of doctrinal deviation, leading God’s people out of the storm and ultimately to peaceful waters of contemplation. The theologian who leaves the church at sea is no theologian in the end because he refuses to use his sense of compass to guide God’s people back to concord, that is, to the unity of the faith and the blessedness of the *visio Dei*. Whether the theologian operates as an official pastor or not, the apostle expects every theologian to be *pastoral*. Otherwise, the theologian loses his prophetic credibility, incapable of delivering the knowledge of God to the people of God for the sake of their own safety and sanctity.

Contemplation and Consecration

A theologian who understands classical theology as a spiritual exercise is a theologian discontent with mere adherence to sound doctrine should the holiness of his life fail to match the sanctity of his theology. The novice theologian is often told to undergo rigor to ensure a knowledge of God. Here is a worthy calling. For anti-intellectualism is a gross incongruity with a God whose knowledge is without measure. However, that charge cannot be the last word, otherwise it fails to understand the nature of classical theology itself. As Gilles Emery has said, “trinitarian theology is a spiritual exercise.”³⁴ Yet that same blessing must be said over the discipline of dogmatics as a whole. We cannot conclude by defining theology as *mere knowledge* of God, but a *contemplation* of God. For theology, as Turretin said paraphrasing Thomas, is not only taught by God and about God,

³³ ST II–II.133; quoted in Kapic, *You’re Only Human*, 106.

³⁴ Gilles Emery, *The Trinity* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 20.

but theology *leads to God*—*theologia a Deo Docetur, Deum docet, et ad Deum ducit*.³⁵ The theologian has not dedicated himself to the mere acquisition of knowledge, but he has vowed to stand with David as he gazes at the beauty of the Lord. Apart from knowledge no one will see the face of Jesus Christ, yet that same knowledge is given for the distinct purpose of seeing God in the face of Jesus Christ. As Jesus said, “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (Jn. 17:3).

Previously I said that the theologian serves the church best when he lifts the gaze of God’s people to behold the beauty of the Lord. In 1 John 3 Jesus’ beloved disciple says our simple gaze at the beauty of the Lord will reach its pinnacle moment in the beatific vision. “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (3:2). For John, seeing God in the eschaton is inseparable from glorification, or at least indispensable to that end. If God is light, as John says in his opening chapter, then we become like him when we see him because all darkness dissipates in his presence.

One could object that the guarantee of future perfection in the beatific vision might create passivity in the present.³⁶ However, John commits to the opposite assumption: this future hope galvanizes holiness now. “And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (3:3). The theologian fulfills his calling by spurring the church to purify itself now in preparation for that future day when she shall behold the beauty of the Lord and whatever darkness still clinging to her robe will scatter in the radiance of his purifying light.

However, the theologian betrays the church’s hope in the beatific vision whenever he fails to exemplify the sanctified life to the bride Christ has washed with his own blood. John’s warning at the start of his first letter is applicable: “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth” (1 Jn. 1:5–6). The theologian who is not holy himself loses theological credibility to usher God’s people into the presence of God’s light when he still roams the streets of darkness. Without consecration how can he lead God’s people to contemplation? Put otherwise, the theologian who is not set apart to the Lord lacks integrity when he claims to unveil the God of truth. However true his words may be, his

³⁵Turretin, *Institutes*, I.1.7 (he has in view *ST* I.1.7, though the phrase itself is a “medieval scholastic adage”).

³⁶As mentioned already, theology is more contemplative than theoretical or practical (i.e., the active life). The contemplative has priority; nevertheless, the active life may precede the contemplative. “In the order of generation the disposition precedes form, though absolutely speaking and by its nature the form is prior” (*ST* II–II.182.4).

life bears false witness. He takes God's name in vain. Consider the sober warning of Johannes Cocceius in his *Summa Theologiae*: "The person who speaks [of] God and divine matters [but does so] not from love of God and for God's glory is not able to speak of God truly, for he does not really know him and does not speak from God and in God."³⁷

If God is the object of our simple gaze, then thinking theologically not only requires the Holy Spirit to awaken our hearts (a prerequisite to *true* theology), but it depends on an ongoing illumination of our minds. Plato believed illumination occurs when we leave behind the darkness of the cave and its shadows to walk into the radiance and reality of the sun, the Good.³⁸ Paul said something similar but with Christological eyes: "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. . . . For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). For all their differences, Plato and Paul alike operated with a realist metaphysic—including its participation paradigm—that allows the theologian to count the many ways the light of divinity is the basis for all the light we can see in this present world.

However, Plato thought the solution to darkness was mere recollection of the world of Being by means of education. By contrast, Paul said God himself must shine his light within the darkness of the heart—remembrance is misguided when regeneration is necessary. Otherwise, we will never desire to leave the cave and enter the light of his Son's life. For this reason, Psalms 36:9 should be interpreted through a Christological lens: "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light."

Classical theology is a spiritual exercise because God is the object of our simple gaze, but unless the God of classical theology opens the eyes of the blind first then theology will always be an exercise in Pelagianism. To that end, Thomas and Turretin alike said theology is taught *by* God. Theology is a spiritual exercise because the Holy Spirit must shed the light of the Son's grace into our hearts so that we become the recipients of the Father's benevolence. A robust knowledge of God in Christ is essential—to adapt the grammar of a Reformed scholastic like Franciscus Junius, divine truth is theology's formal cause, divine matters the material cause, and divine discourse the instrumental cause.³⁹ Yet

³⁷As quoted in Kelly Kopic, *A Little Book for New Theologians* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 46.

³⁸For Plato's use of the cave allegory, see bk. 7 of his *Republic*.

³⁹Franciscus Junius, *A Treatise on True Theology* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Heritage Books, 2014),

without the sanctifying illumination of the Spirit the theologian risks severing knowledge from its divine source. The Holy Trinity must be theology's efficient cause—theology is not only *of* God and leads *to* God, but theology is taught *by* God.⁴⁰ In pastoral terms, the theologian who sits down to write a tough bit of theology *should* expect his mind to operate with greater clarity if he has petitioned the Spirit at the beginning and the end of his theological musing, much like Anselm. For what theologian can understand the things of God apart from the Spirit of God?

The theologian's dependence on the Spirit, however, is not a mere, momentary reliance on his presence but presupposes a liberation in the past with ongoing effects for the future. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul says a veil was draped over the face of Moses so that the Israelites "might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end." For Paul the veil of Moses is allegorical: "But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away" (3:14). Christ is the turning point: "But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed" (3:16). How is the veil removed? A better question may be, *Who* removes the veil that lies over the heart? The Holy Spirit. "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (3:17). Freedom to do what exactly? The Spirit liberates the blind from darkness so that they can behold the radiance of the Son, a most shocking revelation considering even Moses had to be hidden behind the rock as God's glory passed by. In the words of the apostle Paul, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (3:18).

If Paul's Trinitarian theology of eschatological liberation is applied to the mission of the theologian, then theology is a regenerative task that operates under the sanctifying power of the Spirit. For the sake of the church, the theologian ushers the body of Christ into the presence of Christ, and under the authority of the Holy Spirit says to unveiled faces, *behold*. Yet for Paul, beholding is not to be

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⁴⁰Turretin, Junius, and Thomas's emphasis on God as efficient cause is not intended to eclipse the theologian himself. When theologians use the grammar of "principle" the place of the theologian surfaces. The mind of the theologian is the subjective cognitive principle. For example, John Webster writes, "the Holy Trinity is the ontological principle (*principium essendi*) of Christian theology; its external or objective cognitive principle (*principium cognoscendi externum*) is the Word of God presented through the embassy of the prophets and apostles; its internal or subjective cognitive principle (*principium cognoscendi internum*) is the redeemed intelligence of the saints." Webster, *The Domain of the Word* (London and New York: Bloomsbury T T Clark, 2012), 135.

severed from transformation itself. The Spirit must first remove the veil to behold the Lord, the object of their gaze. Returning to a Christological interpretation of Psalm 36:9, Paul might as well have said, in your light do we *become light*.⁴¹ For not only Paul but Peter says that by means of the beatific vision we “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). The task of the theologian, therefore, is to consecrate the people of God for *participation* by means of *contemplation*.

Classical Theology and Self-Forgetfulness

If the calling of classical theology grips the theologian's imagination, then a self-forgetfulness will show its presence. For as long as *theologia* is not only the starting point but the goal, then the classical theologian is galvanized—even in discouraging moments of theological trial—to serve the church until she sees God in the face of Christ by virtue of the ascending power of the Spirit. The classical theologian is not so concerned with himself so much as the task of theology *coram Deo*—before the face of God.

No doubt the eschaton will unveil many a theologian mad with joy because those entrusted to their care participate in the life of the holy Trinity. Yet that joy only comes to those theologians who humble themselves, forgetting themselves long enough to consecrate their theology to the way of the cross, embodying the suffering servant to God's covenant people. “For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your [the church's] servants for Jesus' sake” (2 Cor. 4:5).

⁴¹To consider how the grammar of “light from light” is utilized in Trinitarian theology, see Andrew R. Hay, *God's Shining Forth: A Trinitarian Theology of Divine Light*, Princeton Theological Monograph (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017). Also consider the patristic usage with Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 157–241.

