

Knowledge of God as Assimilation and Participation: An Essay on Theological Pedagogy in the Light of Biblical Epistemology

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The doctrine of the Trinity makes any attempt to formulate a Christian epistemology problematic. This is because, from a Trinitarian perspective, God is not a solitary being – set apart from other, lesser beings and communicating knowledge of Himself as one being would to another. Rather, the Triune God is, to quote the apostle Paul, the being in which “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).¹ The Triune God of grace has come to dwell in the flesh among us, and His Holy Spirit makes us “participants of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). From a Trinitarian perspective, acquiring the knowledge of God necessarily entails cognitive and volitional participation in the life of God.

The word that Christians have long used to describe the content, reception, clarification, preservation, and dissemination of this participatory knowledge of God is *theologia*. In the classical sense, theology is no mere academic discipline. Rather, it refers both to the content of divine knowledge (knowing things as God knows them, so to speak) and to the disciplined pedagogical practices associated with learning, keeping, and disseminating this knowledge.² Theology in this sense is a disciplined habit, a kind of enculturation or *paideia* aimed at the cultivation of God’s own wisdom. Importantly, the practice of theology was, during the patristic and medieval eras, inseparable from Sacred Scripture, which was conceived as a kind of sacrament of salvation, guiding readers through its pages into the mysterious embrace of the Triune God. Hugh of St. Victor captured the traditional view when he wrote in the twelfth century: “Theologia, id est divina scriptura.”³ To be fair, we should acknowledge that the word *theologia* is found nowhere in the Bible. However,

¹All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

²It’s helpful to consider that the term “theology” (*theologia*) has long had a double meaning. In the classic sense, adopted from the Greeks and Romans by early Christian writers, theology means simply “Knowledge of Divine things,” or more specifically, “knowledge of God.” See Yves Congar, *A History of Theology* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968), 28-36. But theology can also refer to a “discipline, usually occurring in some sort of pedagogical setting” (Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983], 31). Importantly, the discipline of theology and the methods employed therein should be directed toward “knowledge of God,” so that the second sense of the word theology is subservient to the first sense. For a helpful account of the patristic uses of the word *theologia* and its later developments during the medieval and modern eras, see Frank Whaling, “The Development of the Word ‘Theology’,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981): 289-312. See also, Gillian R. Evans, *Old Arts and New Theology: The Beginnings of Theology as an Academic Discipline* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

³Cited in Whaling, “The Development of the Word ‘Theology’,” 297.

its use among early Christian philosophers such as Clement and Origen of Alexandria, Irenaeus, and many to follow is entirely consistent with the Bible's own epistemological presuppositions.

This claim is well supported by a series of essays published by Paternoster Press in a book titled, *The Bible and Epistemology: Biblical Soundings on the Knowledge of God* (2007).⁴ Importantly, each of the book's contributing authors shares the conviction that the knowledge of God is necessarily participatory and can only be received as a gift by the person whose mind and will are conformed to God in Christ. Such knowledge "does not arise through domination but through attentiveness to the object. Such attentiveness conforms the knower to what is known rather than the other way around."⁵ To acquire knowledge of God, in other words, persons must undergo a transformation of their own intellect and will – they must be conformed to God in Christ. To use Thomist language, "all [knowledge of God] is produced by an assimilation of the knower to the thing known, so that assimilation is said to be the cause of knowledge."⁶

This observation, which is consistent with the classical view of *theologia* as *paideia*, is certainly not novel, but its implications for theological education are too seldom taken seriously and acted upon.⁷ This paper considers what theological pedagogy looks like when knowledge of God is understood as assimilation to and participation in the life of the Trinity.

The paper consists of four sections. The first section offers a more detailed investigation of biblical epistemology. I will demonstrate, here, that the assimilative and participatory nature of "knowledge of God" in the Bible necessitates particular kinds of pedagogies if this knowledge is to be communicated and learned. In the second part of the paper, I will demonstrate how the practices of patristic and medieval theology were well suited to the aforementioned biblical epistemology. In particular, the four senses of scripture served as a "divine pedagogy," assimilating readers of the sacred page to God by drawing them into the biblical narrative. This ancient form of *lectio* began to transform gradually, however, with the rise of theology as an academic discipline in the high and late Middle Ages. As theology became increasingly academic in the late medieval and modern eras, its participatory and assimilative nature was

⁴Mary Healy and Robin Parry, *The Bible and Epistemology: Biblical Soundings on the Knowledge of God* (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2007).

⁵Murray Rae, " 'Incline Your Ear So That You May Live': Principles of Biblical Epistemology," in *The Bible and Epistemology*, 161.

⁶Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 12, a. 9. Cited in *Ibid*.

⁷Nevertheless, there is a significant body of literature addressing the notion of theological education as "*paideia*," which is closely related to my own project. Farley initiated an ongoing, though relatively unfruitful, dialogue among mainline theological educators with his *Theologia*. Other authors have continued the conversation. See, for example, David H. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993). For an evangelical contribution, see Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). For a more recent Roman Catholic contribution, see select essays in Patrick W. Carey and Earl C. Muller, eds., *Theological Education in the Catholic Tradition: Contemporary Challenges* (New York: Crossroad, 1997).

increasingly neglected. This development has been the subject of many fine theological works, so I will not discuss it at length in this essay.⁸

In the third section, however, I will discuss some of the problems stemming from this development before examining how theological practices, when they are divorced from a participatory and assimilative framework, can become essentially nonsensical, employing methods that are ill-suited to a practice whose proper object and governing principle is the knowledge of God. In the final section, I will offer several observations about the potential future of theological education if it is reconceived in light of an assimilative and participatory epistemology.

Biblical Epistemology and Pedagogies of Assimilation

Scholars have long noted that the Hebrew verb, *yāda'* (to know) suggests much more than theoretical apprehension of an objective reality. "To know," in the Hebrew sense, indicates understanding through personal experience. Mary Healy explains that, in the Old Testament, *yāda'* "can be applied to such widely varied experiences as childlessness, sickness, sin, divine retribution, war, peace, good and evil, and sexual intercourse."⁹ Thus, to know good and evil or sexual intercourse, from an Old Testament perspective, is to be intimately familiar with these things through personal experience of them. Adam and Eve, for example, ate the forbidden fruit and came "to know" both good and evil experientially and intimately. Likewise, in the Old Testament, the knowledge of God (*da'at' ʾĕlōhīm*) comes only through personal relationship with God. The knowledge of God does not exclude theoretical knowledge¹⁰ but it entails more than this—it is to experience and understand God relationally and holistically.

Learning God in Ancient Israel

Ryan O'Dowd makes two important and interrelated observations about knowledge of God in ancient Israel. The first point concerns epistemology. O'Dowd writes,

Epistemology in Deuteronomy is grounded in the *ontology* and *ethics* of Yahweh's created world. Knowledge is a product of living in the redemptive story in accordance with the torah. This torah is a living memorial of Yahweh's Horeb theophany and thus the moral and orderly

⁸See, for example, Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

⁹Mary Healy, "Knowledge of the Mystery: A Study of Pauline Epistemology," in *The Bible and Epistemology*, 141.

¹⁰Gregory Vall is critical of modern interpreters with a tendency to downplay the propositional or theoretical dimension of "knowledge of God" in the book of Hosea. He explains that, for some, the knowledge of God is merely a practical understanding of God's "moral will." For others, it is a kind of ethical intuition, while at least one writer goes so far as to describe it as "true religious feeling." Contrary to these more romantic interpretations, Vall suggests that Hosea is fundamentally concerned with Israel's "understanding" of God, an understanding which is tantamount to "knowing who God is and what he expects." See Gregory Vall, "An Epistemology of Faith: The Knowledge of God in Israel's Prophetic Literature," in *The Bible and Epistemology*, 30-31.

means to reproduce his powerful presence in all future generations. At the same time, torah is a witness that Israel cannot (will not) keep the torah on her own.¹¹

O'Dowd is suggesting that Israel's knowledge of God is necessarily framed by God's story of redemption, within which the book of Deuteronomy is situated.¹² The Pentateuch, he suggests, "relates a redemptive or re-creative story which is centered upon the presence and knowledge of Yahweh,"¹³ and Deuteronomy is concerned that, after Moses' death, Israel will continue to "know" Yahweh by living in continuity with God's redemptive actions in history through obedience to the Torah. The epistemology of Deuteronomy is thus assimilative and participatory. It is assimilative because Israel knows God only as its own communal identity is conformed to God's ongoing story of redemption. It is participatory because Israel can be assimilated to God's story of redemption (and thus God's will) only by living according to the Torah.

And this brings us to O'Dowd's second and interrelated point, which concerns pedagogy. He writes:

Israel's access to knowledge is *performative* by virtue of the roles Deuteronomy creates for the community. Reading, hearing, writing, singing, remembering and obeying the torah actualize the ontological realities of Israel's relationship with Yahweh. Furthermore, Deuteronomy devises an interpretive approach to knowledge, whereby events, laws, people and even history must be interpreted within the contours, principles and purposes in the drama of history.¹⁴

Thus, we see in the Pentateuch that God establishes, for his people, a pedagogical regimen appropriate to an assimilative and participatory epistemology. What we see is a people "learning/remembering" the God revealed to Moses by participating in a sort of divinely established pedagogy¹⁵—learning to

¹¹Ryan O'Dowd, "Memory on the Boundary: Epistemology in Deuteronomy," in *The Bible and Epistemology*, 20 (italics original).

¹²M. Sternberg, "Time and Space in Biblical (Hi)Story Telling: The Grand Chronology," in *The Book and the Text: the Bible and Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 89.

¹³O'Dowd, "Memory on the Boundary," 6.

¹⁴Ibid., 20 (italics original).

¹⁵Francis Martin calls our attention to the pedagogical function of the Psalms, which "bear us along into a dialogue with God as we make their words our own. Our journey towards an openness to dimensions beyond reach of our instrumental reason is not so much a movement back as it is a movement forward, born along by the word of God which is both ancient and always new. Such a movement, as Fides et Ratio reminds us, requires trust and a recognition that all knowledge is an implicit invitation to communion with God" ("The Word at Prayer: Epistemology in the Psalms," in *The Bible and Epistemology*, 61). This is reminiscent of Bonhoeffer's injunction that we pray the Psalter because it is "the prayer book of Jesus Christ in the truest sense of the word. He prayed the Psalter and now it has become his prayer for all time. . . . Now that Christ is with the Father, the new humanity of Christ, the Body of Christ on earth, continues to pray to the end of time" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1954], 46).

know God through liturgies of “reading, hearing, writing, singing, remembering, obeying”—liturgies meant to help Israel understand and “fulfill her created role, bearing fruit among the nations.”¹⁶ Alexander Schmemmann explains this idea beautifully when he writes that “the *leitourgia* of ancient Israel was the corporate work of a chosen few to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah. And in this act of preparation they became what they were called to be, the Israel of God, the chosen instrument of His purpose.”¹⁷

Learning God in the New Testament Church

Of course, these same epistemological assumptions carry through the entire Old Testament¹⁸ and find their apex with the incarnation of God in Jesus. In this way, the epistemology of the Old Testament establishes an unfulfilled ideal only realized, in full, with the incarnation.¹⁹ For instance, in the Gospel of John, the incarnate Word fulfills Israel’s role in God’s redemptive story, being, as he was, fully conformed to God’s will and mediating the knowledge and redemptive blessing of God to the nations.²⁰ Indeed, Clement of Alexandria considers Jesus the “consummate παιδαγωγός”:

Therefore since the Logos himself has come to us from heaven, it seems to me that we need no longer have resort to human teaching, seeking knowledge in Athens or the rest of Greece or Ionia. For if we have as teacher the one who has filled everything with his holy activities – creation, salvation, beneficence, law-giving, prophecy, teaching – this teacher now gives us all instruction, and, through the Logos, the whole universe has now become Athens and Greece. (*Protr.* 11, 112.1)²¹

Mary Healy describes a Christological fulfillment of Old Testament epistemology in the Pauline corpus and suggests that knowledge of God is mediated by Christ, the teacher, as God offers a “definitive communication of

¹⁶O’Dowd, “Memory on the Boundary,” 20.

¹⁷Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1964), 25. Elsewhere, he writes that the Liturgy is the “ontological condition of theology . . . because it is in the Church, of which the *leitourgia* is the expression of the life, that the sources of theology are functioning precisely as sources” (Alexander Schmemmann, “Theology in Liturgical Tradition,” in *Worship in Scripture and Tradition* [ed. Massey Shepherd; London: Oxford University Press, 1963], 175).

¹⁸*The Bible and Epistemology* offers a much more comprehensive survey of both the Old and New Testaments than I can offer here. Although the essays are written by different scholars, they conclude that biblical epistemology is remarkably consistent throughout.

¹⁹Gregory Vall calls attention to the anticipatory character (i.e. Israel expects to know God fully at some future time) of epistemology in Old Testament prophetic literature in his essay: “An Epistemology of Faith,” 24-41.

²⁰Cornelius Bennema suggests that, in the Johannine literature, the knowledge of God “is pneumatological and christocentric in nature, is soteriological, ethical and evaluative in its aim, and has cognitive, relational, volitional and affective aspects,” in “Christ, the Spirit and the Knowledge of God: A Study of Johannine Epistemology” (*The Bible and Epistemology*, 130).

²¹Cited in Judith L. Kovacs, “Divine Pedagogy and the Gnostic Teacher according to Clement of Alexandria,” *J ECS* 9 (2001): 3-4.

himself through the person and life of Jesus Christ,²² the central event in the biblical story and the event which sheds light on, not only God's redemptive plan,²³ but also his nature and character. Thus, Jesus Christ, situated as he is in the context of the drama of salvation, reveals "God's love (Rom 5:8); righteousness (Rom 1:17; cf. 3:21f, 25); glory (Rom 9:23; and faithfulness to his promises (Rom 15:8))."²⁴

As is the case with the epistemology of the Old Testament, Paul assumes that we come "to know" God as we are assimilated into and become willing participants in His "grand unified story," which is "an epic narrative of the relationship between the human and its creator which stretches from creation to the final eschatological fulfillment."²⁵ Healy attests to the fundamentally relational and transformative nature of biblical epistemology when she writes that, "for Paul, those who accept the Spirit's revelation do not merely acknowledge *that* Christ is Lord and Savior, but come to know him *as* Lord and Savior by entering into a relationship with him and experiencing his power at work in their lives (cf. 2 Cor 4:5f; Phil 3:8)."²⁶

Importantly, the knowledge of God described in the Bible allows for no separation between knowing and doing. The Sacred Scriptures do not distinguish between *theoria* and *praxis* as the Greeks did. Instead, those who live in bondage to sin are described as having no knowledge of God (Hos 4:1; 1 Cor 1:21; Gal 4:8; 1 Thess 4:5; 2 Thess 1:8) while those being saved are said simply to know God (Hos 6:6; Rom 11:3; Gal 4:9). From a biblical perspective, the knowledge of God is not a prerequisite to salvation as theory is sometimes said to precede practice. Rather, the knowledge of God is a fundamental dimension of our salvation. Henri de Lubac explains it this way: "The entire process of spiritual understanding is, in its principle, identical to the process of conversion. It is its luminous aspect. *Intellectus spiritualis credentem salvum facit* (Spiritual understanding saves the believer)."²⁷

Murray Rae offers a summary of the epistemological assumptions of both the Old and New Testaments, suggesting that the knowledge of God in the

²²Healy, "Knowledge of the Mystery," 137.

²³Healy writes of Pauline epistemology that "the hidden salvific plan of God, 'what God has prepared for those who love him', is *revealed* to believers by being *given to* or realized within them. . . . The Spirit does not merely bestow knowledge of God's secret plans, but empowers the believer to personally assimilate the redemptive grace released by Christ's passion and resurrection" (Ibid., 139).

²⁴Ibid., 137-38.

²⁵Ian W. Scott, *Paul's Way of Knowing: Story, Experience, and the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 108.

²⁶Healy, "Knowledge of the Mystery," 140. We should not, however, take this "personalistic" perspective on the knowledge of God to imply that doctrine is unimportant. Healy suggests that, "on the contrary, Paul emphasizes the inseparability of doctrinal and personal knowledge in the rebuke of 1 Corinthians 15:34, where he charges that the denial of the resurrection by some demonstrates that they 'have no knowledge of God.' Their rejection of a central tenet of the gospel shows that they have scarcely a minimal acquaintance with God and his ways" (Ibid., 143).

²⁷Henri de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 21.

Christian Bible is ethical, pneumatological, and salvific in the sense of de Lubac's statement above. He suggests a

reciprocal relationship between knowledge and action. It is true that we learn through doing, rather than through detached reflection, but, equally, our action in the world is shaped and reshaped by all that is learned along the way. This indeed seems to be the biblical pattern. The Bible tells the story of the formation and education of a people. Such *paideia* takes place as God guides his people through the parted waters of the Red Sea and accompanies their wanderings through the wilderness to the Promised Land, and again in their exile from and return to Jerusalem. This long history of Israel is replicated in the life of Jesus who invites our participation in his own journey through the waters of baptism, into the wilderness and on to Calvary, an exile once more from Jerusalem's city walls. Again, the formation and education of a people is underway. Those who follow Jesus on this road are being shaped as stewards and witnesses of God's purpose for the world, and precisely through that process, learn the skills of covenant relationality with God.²⁸

As with O'Dowd's analysis of Deuteronomy discussed above, Rae is here describing what we might call a divine pedagogy, since God is the teacher and the shaper of the covenant community of salvation. Knowledge of God can in no way be conceived outside of the liturgical context that Rae describes above. Indeed, we come to know the Father, only through the mediation of the son in the ecclesial community of the Spirit. De Lubac describes our knowledge of God as an inter-Trinitarian reality when he suggests that the beatific vision (classically understood as the *telos* of all our knowledge of God) is not "the contemplation of a spectacle, but an intimate participation in the vision the Son has of the Father in the bosom of the Trinity."²⁹ From a biblical perspective, to know God is to be assimilated, and therefore made a willing participant, in the salvific economy of the Triune God.

Assimilation in Patristic and Medieval Theology

Although the Patristic era of Christian history is no doubt complex, there are some generalizations that can legitimately be made.³⁰ For example, it is fair to

²⁸Rae, "Incline Your Ear," 172.

²⁹Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), 228.

³⁰Susan K. Wood, for reasons similar to my own, acknowledges this complexity. She writes that "patristic theology can be divided into several phases: the beginning period before the accession of the emperor Constantine (second to third centuries), the Golden Age of patristic thought (fourth to fifth centuries), and the later patristic period (sixth to seventh centuries). It is also possible to distinguish them geographically and linguistically: Latin West, Greek East, Egyptians, Asiatics, Syrians, and Palestinians" ("Liturgy: The Integrative Center of the Theological Disciplines," in *Theological Education in the Catholic tradition: Contemporary Challenges* [ed. Patrick W. Carey and Earl C. Muller; New York: Crossroad, 1997], 285). I would add that we can also distinguish between those working within and without what comes to be known as the Catholic and Orthodox faith. Thus, when I speak generally of Patristic theology, what I say will hopefully be true of Origen, Irenaeus, and Augustine though not of Marcion or Arius.

say that throughout the patristic and well into the medieval era, an assimilative and participatory epistemology was taken as a given. It was assumed by all within the Catholic faith, that knowledge of God entails assimilation to God and that we come to know God, principally, through participation in the Church's liturgical worship of and witness to the Triune God of glory.³¹ According to Susan Wood,

Patristic ways of reading the Scriptures and thinking about God represent a unity of worship, life, and theological reflection. . . . One consequence of the interrelation between holiness of life and teaching was that knowledge was influenced by participation in what was known. Christian life and worship developed a character in which there was the likeness of God. Roberta Bondi reports that real knowledge was based on an affinity between the knower and the thing known.³²

Perhaps the greatest evidence of the assimilative and thus liturgical shape of patristic and medieval epistemology is found in the principles of biblical exegesis that developed during this period. Namely, the development and widespread uses of typological and allegorical interpretations of scripture were entirely fitting in light of the Bible's own assimilative and participatory assumptions.³³ Stated more succinctly, the methods of ancient and medieval exegesis were appropriate in light of the Bible's own implicit epistemology.

De Lubac's massive four-volume study of medieval exegesis (which was preceded by a five-hundred page work on Origen's spiritual exegesis³⁴) remains unsurpassed as an historical account of the four senses of scripture. De Lubac focused such great attention on spiritual exegesis because he no doubt,

³¹I use the word "liturgy" here in the widest possible sense to mean simply "the work of the people." Schmemmann is helpful when he says that *leitourgia* is "an action by which a group of people become something corporately which they had not been as a mere collection of individuals – a whole greater than the sum of its parts" (*For the Life of the World*, 25). Thus, when Christians are playing their parts in the drama of God's salvation, their lives have a liturgical shape, even apart from formal corporate worship.

³²Wood, "Liturgy: The Integrative Center of the Theological Disciplines," 285. In an essay on Christian exegesis from the Apostolic Fathers through Irenaeus, Joseph Trigg writes that "even as Christian theologians in the patristic era became more sophisticated in their interpretation of Scripture, they never abandoned the fundamental scriptural orientation we already find among the Apostolic Fathers, who use the Bible, not simply to give an account of the Christian faith, but also to guide them in everyday conduct, both individually and as a community, and to provide them an indispensable language of worship." Trigg also mentions the importance of the rule of faith, which provides, from Irenaeus on, an "authoritative interpretation of Scripture which can be demonstrated out of Scripture itself," and which helps to "clarify the "Bible's meaning." See Joseph Trigg, "The Apostolic Fathers and the Apologists," in *A History of Biblical Interpretation. Volume 1: The Ancient Period* (ed. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 330.

³³Although I will not describe the great creedal tradition of the ecumenical councils which are certainly an important aspect of the patristic golden age, I should mention that an assimilative epistemology is no doubt consistent with this tradition as well, as is suggested by the Latin dictum, *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*.

³⁴Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture according to Origen* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007).

preferred the assimilative and participatory epistemology of the Church fathers to those of modern rationalists and subjectivists, and he hoped to help the Church take advantage of the wisdom of its own great tradition, especially the wisdom of patristic and medieval exegesis.

As is well known, ancient commentators recognized four scriptural senses: the literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical.³⁵ The meaning of these four senses is described in a famous medieval saying: “the letter teaches us what took place, the allegory what to believe, the moral what to do, the anagogy what goal to strive for.”³⁶ What de Lubac found so appealing in the ancient hermeneutic with its four senses, was precisely a divine pedagogy, or a *sacra doctrina* which guides readers through the biblical text and ever deeper into a participatory knowledge of God in Christ. The four senses, in other words, were explicitly assimilative. They allowed biblical exegetes to immerse themselves in the world of the Bible and to stretch the Bible so that it shed light on all things. The epistemological end of the four senses was quite simply the knowledge of God and all things in relation to God. For de Lubac, theology is superficial and inauthentic unless it does in fact lead to true knowledge of God, which must be assimilative and participatory, since God is not an object to be known extrinsically.

³⁵It may be a bit misleading to speak of the four senses as if they were determinative of a consistent method employed throughout the patristic and medieval eras. The four senses of scripture were, indeed, largely recognized. Origen is perhaps the well-spring, though he only spoke of three senses: the literal, the moral, and the spiritual. Augustine speaks of four senses in chapters 5-6 of *De utilitate credendi*, though he gives them different names than the medievals do. He mentions them as well in his *De Genesi ad litteram*. Cassiodorus describes them in his commentary on the Psalms (sixth century). However, not all commentators focused on all of the senses in all of their exegetical works. We find, for example, figures such as Gregory the Great focusing on the literal, allegorical, and tropological senses but not with the anagogical in his famous commentary on Job. Others, such as Andrew of St. Victor in the twelfth century focused entirely on the literal/historical sense, though he believed that his work was providing a foundation for others who dealt with the spiritual senses. The best example of the four senses providing the basis for a method is found in the practice of *lectio divina* in the Cistercian School of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. We should also remember that, throughout the ancient and medieval eras, exegetes employed various methodologies of grammatical, rhetorical, and literary analysis in their efforts to comprehend the senses of scripture. I should also note that, in the Patristic East it was far more common for exegetes to deal generally with the two primary senses of scripture, the literal and the spiritual. For a very helpful chronological summary of medieval exegesis, beginning with Gregory the Great, see Mary A. Mayeski, “Early Medieval Exegesis: Gregory I to The Twelfth Century,” in *A History of Biblical Interpretation, Volume 2: The Medieval through the Reformation Periods* (ed. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 86-112. For a much more detailed, though somewhat dated, chronological study, see Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964). For some very helpful comments on the issue of method in relation to the four senses, see Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture* (4 vols; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 2:207-216.

³⁶Henri de Lubac, “On an Old Distich: The Doctrine of the ‘Fourfold Sense’ in Scripture,” in *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1989), 109. For more on the Latin formula, see Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, 1:1-14.

Regarding the divine pedagogy of the four senses, the process of assimilation must always begin with the literal (also called the historical) sense.³⁷ God intervenes in human history, and through the Bible we “learn the history of his interventions.”³⁸ The literal sense is the foundational sense upon which all of the others are based.³⁹ Indeed, ancient exegetes were well aware of the potential dangers of eisegesis, and many took care that their Christological and moral interpretations of texts grew out of the author’s original intention.⁴⁰ Indeed, if the objective of theological knowledge is assimilation to the God revealed in Jesus Christ, then it is imperative that our exegesis is attentive to what the biblical texts actually say about Christ. John David Dawson makes this same point when he writes that “Christianity demands respect for the letter of the spirit, respect for the grammars of difference that constitute identity. Christians choose to identify themselves with one who has already identified himself with each person.”⁴¹ If assimilation to God is the objective, then exegetes must take care not to fashion Jesus after our own identities. Respect for the letter is thus foundational.⁴²

De Lubac suggests that anyone “who neglects to study [the historical sense] is . . . like the grammarian who would believe he could neglect the alphabet.”⁴³ The historical sense, when considered in light of the anagogical

³⁷Regarding potential misunderstandings of the literal sense, de Lubac explains, “It has been said that a literal reading is not identical to a historical one; in many passages, even in entire books, it can offer no historical meaning: this is true for parables, proverbs, commandments, etc. . . . But—without considering that in this case a terminology used until the thirteenth century would have resulted in a denial that there was still a literal meaning – here we are dealing with the ‘letter’ of the Scripture taken as a whole. Nevertheless, is it not essential for Scripture to recount a history, the history of redemptive events? Is that not, even for the unbelieving observer, the characteristic that most markedly differentiates the Bible from so many other sacred Scriptures? Again, it has been said that, even if allegory has a certain value, it alone does not provide the doctrine to be believed. Is not the doctrine often expressed by the literal reading? De Lubac, “On an Old Distich,” 122-23. In other words, it is often the case that the literal meaning is itself figurative or allegorical—the literal sense is whatever the authorial intent was.

³⁸De Lubac, “On an Old Distich,” 113-114.

³⁹Gregory the Great’s comments are typical: “We must first settle the root of the historical meaning, that we may afterwards let our minds take their fill of the fruits of the allegorical senses” (Gregory the Great, *Moral.* 1.Pref.21 [trans. John Henry Parker and J. Rivington]; [cited 30 May 2010]. Online: <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/GregoryMoralia/Preface.html>).

⁴⁰For a very helpful summary of Hugh of St. Victor’s concern for the literal sense, see Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 87-97.

⁴¹J. D. Dawson, “Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Christian Identity in Boyarin, Auerbach and Frei,” *Modern Theology* 14 (1998): 194.

⁴²Of course, patristic and medieval exegetes were often ill-equipped to discover the literal sense, and some, quite frankly hardly tried. For this reason, de Lubac hoped that contemporary biblical scholarship might be made more “theological” in order that it could serve assimilation rather than chasing after some other objective. See de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 71.

⁴³De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, 2:45. Though de Lubac makes no attribution, this is perhaps taken from Hugh of St. Victor who writes of the literal sense, “Do not despise these lesser things. They who despise the lesser things gradually fail. If you scorn to learn your alphabet, you will never even make your name as a

sense, provides the fabric from which the allegorical and tropological senses are built. Without the historical sense, there would be no deeper understanding (allegory) and no participation in Christ (tropology) just as there could be no words without the letters from which they are built.

Importantly, all of the senses of Scripture work together to form a whole, so the literal cannot be separated from those senses that follow it and is in fact incomplete without them. The literal sense always presupposes a *telos* or an end that gives history its meaning. It would be a mistake, therefore, to study the literal sense from a historicist perspective, “which reconstructs the past without paying any attention to what the past was pregnant with.”⁴⁴

The second sense, the allegorical, serves to deepen and at the same time open up the literal sense in order to mediate the transformation of the historical Jesus into the omnipresent, *totus Christus*. De Lubac follows Augustine in claiming that everything in Scripture pertains not only to Christ but to the Church as well. When Christ is united with the Church as head to a body, then the fullness of Christ appears. The allegorical sense points to the fullness of Christ.⁴⁵ It is assimilative because it enables the Church to continually interpret reality from a Christological perspective.⁴⁶

With the third sense, the tropological, a person comes “to know himself with his misery and his sin while getting to know the perfection for which God destines and calls him.”⁴⁷ This is the moral sense that follows from the Church’s doctrines, dogmas, and mysteries, and it is based, above all, on charity. With the tropological sense, the Bible acts as a mirror that reveals the drama of the Church’s historical existence as well as the drama of every individual’s interior life.⁴⁸ The tropological is that sense through which persons are called to become imitators of Christ. Like the other senses, the tropological must always be understood within the fourfold context because all of the senses complement each other. For example, whereas the allegorical sense unlocks the Christological and ecclesiological meaning of Scripture and the tropological is applied to individuals, the tropological sense cannot be understood from an individualistic perspective because the Church is fundamentally social and because each

grammarian” (*Didascalicon*, vi.iii; cited in Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 87).

⁴⁴Henri de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 39.

⁴⁵Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale: Les Quatre Sens de L’écriture* (vol. 2.1; Théologie 42; Paris: Aubier, 1961), 504.

⁴⁶Ressourcement theologians, Henri de Lubac and Jean Danielou, disagreed over the continued usefulness of allegory. For Danielou, typology was preferable. For de Lubac’s defense of allegory, see Henri de Lubac, “Typology and Allegorization,” in *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 129-164. For a helpful discussion of the disagreement between de Lubac and Danielou, see Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 149-90.

⁴⁷De Lubac, “On an Old Distich,” 115.

⁴⁸*Ibid.* The most famous example of a Church Father reading the Bible this way is found, of course, in Augustine’s *Confessions*. For a beautiful treatment of this theme as it is found in Hugh of St. Victor, see Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh’s Didascalicon* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 21-23.

individual is united with every other individual through the body and blood of Christ. Thus, the real meaning of the tropological sense will always depend upon the allegorical sense as well as the others.

It is important to note that de Lubac's chapter on tropology is entitled "Mystical Tropology."⁴⁹ The use of the word mystical is meant to communicate an interiorization of Christ's virtues in the individual Christian through a participation in his mystical body. For de Lubac, the revelation of Christ can "in some way be interiorized in man in such a way as to bear its fruit within him."⁵⁰ Thus, mystical tropology makes no attempt to separate morality from epistemology. You might say that we discover the tropological sense not simply when we learn to see all of reality in relation to Christ, but when our own will mirror's Jesus' will.

According to ancient commentators, the three spiritual senses of scripture are identified with the three theological virtues. Allegory builds up faith; tropology builds up love, and anagogy builds up hope.⁵¹ Spiritual exegesis entails a divine pedagogy, or a *sacra doctrina*, that mediates, continually, the graced ascent of nature towards the supernatural.

The anagogical sense of scripture, then, is driven by the faith of allegory and the love of tropology always deeper into the mystery of Christ. De Lubac explains that "however high anagogy leads, it always leaves something to look for and always with greater fervor, because it still does not uncover the Face of God."⁵² He acknowledges his debt to Augustine: "Always seek his face; so that discovery may not bring an end to this quest, whereby love is meant, but, as love increases, let the quest for what has been discovered increase as well."⁵³

In his efforts to retrieve and recommend patristic and medieval exegesis, de Lubac's primary concern is with restoring a theological practice that serves as a divine pedagogy, whose end is a true knowledge of God through a participation in Christ. It is also important to note that this assimilative pedagogy necessarily entails a "confrontation, a combat" with contemporary secular thought,⁵⁴ since its ultimate goal is the illumination of *all reality* in the light of Christ.

⁴⁹De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, 2:127-177.

⁵⁰Ibid., 1:xvi.

⁵¹Ibid., 2:181. See, for instance, Gregory the Great, *Moral.* 3.XXVII.38.

Parker and Rivington, "Gregory the Great—Moralia in Job (Morals on the Book of Job)," XXVII.38.

⁵²De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, 2:193.

⁵³Augustine, cited in de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, 2:193.

⁵⁴Henri de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church: Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances That Occasioned His Writings* (San Francisco: Communio Books, 1993), 36. Bonhoeffer suggests that Christian engagement with secularism entails a "participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life . . . allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ, into the messianic event. . . . This being caught up into the messianic sufferings of God takes a variety of forms in the New Testament. It appears in the call to discipleship, in Jesus' table-fellowship with sinners, in 'conversion' in the narrower sense of the word (e.g., Zacchaeus), in the act of the woman who was a sinner (Luke 7), . . . in the healing of the sick, . . . in Jesus' acceptance of Children. . . . The only thing that is common to all these is their sharing in the suffering of God in Christ. That is their faith." Dietrich Bonhoeffer and

In a now classic mid-twentieth-century essay, Jean Daniélou described Patristic theology as a “vast commentary on Holy Scripture.”⁵⁵ Likewise, de Lubac suggested that from the perspective of the Church fathers, “theological science and the explication of scripture cannot but be one and the same thing.”⁵⁶ Arguably, theology was practiced in an exegetical key even through the height of the medieval scholastic era. Indeed, de Lubac reminds us that the first Question of St. Thomas’ *Summa theologiae* uses the terms “sacred doctrine” and “sacred scripture” synonymously.⁵⁷

The Breakdown of Theology into “Separate” Disciplines

At some point, however, the ancient practices of spiritual exegesis began to give way, and a more academic, less obviously assimilative approach to theology emerged. Many scholars have attempted to trace these developments. Although de Lubac is most famous for his claim that theology went terribly wrong with the separation of nature and grace in the work of Cajetan and other late-medieval Thomists, he also suggests, in the final chapter of *Corpus Mysticum*, that the dialectical method itself is perhaps the beginning of the gradual breakdown.⁵⁸

It may also be the case that distinctions between exegesis proper and the emerging field of dialectical theology came about for pragmatic reasons. Beryl Smalley describes the emergence of the *Glossa ordinaria* in perhaps the eleventh century. The gloss was a method of biblical study that included a biblical manuscript with commentary from various Church fathers in the margins. As time went on, the glosses increased in size and scope so that, eventually, it was necessary to treat the glosses on their own, apart from the biblical manuscript.⁵⁹ Alan Hauser and Duane Watson concur, suggesting that, “as time passed and individual scholars added both new references from the fathers and their own observations, the body of material in the glosses grew substantially. Eventually, *quaestiones*, brief theological discussions that had come to be inserted into the commentaries, were greatly expanded and were ultimately extracted from the commentaries and assembled separately, arranged according to topics rather than according to the biblical texts.”⁶⁰

Eberhard Bethge, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Enl. ed.; New York: Touchstone, 1997), 361-62.

⁵⁵J. Daniélou, “Les orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse,” *Études* 249 (1946): 9. This essay was believed by neo-scholastic theologians of the mid-twentieth century to constitute a kind of “manifesto” for the so-called “new theology.” See Yves M. Congar, *A History of Theology* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968), 8.

⁵⁶De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, 1:27.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸Henri de Lubac, *Corpus mysticum: l’Eucharistie et l’Eglise au Moyen Âge. Étude Historique* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1944), 269-74.

⁵⁹See Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 46-82. For a very brief description of the development of scholasticism and the influence of Aristotelian philosophy, see Farley, *Theologia*, 37-39.

⁶⁰Hauser and Watson, eds., *A History of Biblical Interpretation, Volume 2: The Medieval through the Reformation Periods*, 10. Likewise, Mayeski suggests that, “In the beginning, the separation of the theological questions from the biblical text was probably not

The development of scholastic theology was, therefore, a gradual process, and it did not necessarily come with a rejection of the biblical assumption that knowledge of God entails assimilation and participation. Indeed, contemporary Thomists are in wide agreement that Thomas Aquinas, in referring to theology as *sacra doctrina*, considered it a kind of divine pedagogy through which Christians attain the knowledge of God only as they are assimilated to God, learning to think God's thoughts after Him and developing the capacity to see all things in relation to God.⁶¹

Yet, it is clear that at some point, perhaps by the late Middle Ages, dramatic changes in theology had begun to take hold. In his recent book, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, Matthew Levering argues that, by the time of Erasmus, biblical exegesis was losing its participatory nature and focusing on the "meaning" of texts from the perspective of "linear-historical" thinking. In other words, exegetes were treating the text as a kind of extrinsic given and themselves as detached observers.⁶² This development in biblical exegesis has been the subject of many scholarly works in recent decades. Though I would argue that his narrative theology was deficient in important ways, Hans Frei's *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* offered a highly influential early critique of the development of modern interpretive practices and called attention to the problem of biblical interpretation focused on finding a "meaning" outside of the Bible's own storied world.⁶³ More recently, John O'Keefe and Rusty Reno describe the development, in the modern era, of a "referential theory of meaning, which assumes that our words and sentences are meaningful insofar as they successfully refer or point" to some extrinsic truth such as a historical fact.⁶⁴ The

much noticed. By the time scholars reached this level of theological study, they had so mastered the original text and standard commentaries that they knew well the original location of the theological questions. But over time the separation would have critical consequences for both exegesis and theology. The stage was set for the developments known as Scholasticism," "Early Medieval Exegesis: Gregory I to The Twelfth Century," 102-3.

⁶¹Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers., 2004), 4; Brian Shanley, "Sacra Doctrina and the Theology of Disclosure," *The Thomist* 61 (1997): 177; John Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 54.

⁶²Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 45-52. Levering's thesis offers a challenge to that of Hans Frei who traces the troubled state of modern exegesis to the eighteenth century in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974). Perhaps the difference in their respective thesis can be attributed to the fact that Frei focuses on the Protestant tradition while Levering is more concerned with the Roman Catholic tradition? Several Protestant scholars have recently argued that the early reformers worked within a participatory framework. See, for example, J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1-198.

⁶³Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. For a critique of the work of Frei and Lindbeck and an endorsement of a more participatory approach to biblical exegesis, see my *Everything is Sacred: Spiritual Exegesis in the Political Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Eugene, Oreg.: Cascade Books, 2008), 106-47.

⁶⁴John J. O'Keefe and Rusty R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 8.

objective of biblical exegesis, when a referential theory of meaning is assumed, is no longer assimilation into the salvific drama of the Triune God; rather it is a different kind of knowledge altogether – historicist knowledge. Irrespective of when and where exactly the transformation occurred, it is clear that by the eighteenth century, biblical scholarship and academic theology, broadly conceived, had often become disconnected from its own epistemological presuppositions. Indeed, if the Triune God of the biblical drama can be known only through assimilation and participation, then modern theology has often been (and continues to be) focused on something other than the knowledge of God.

Edward Farley argues that the demise of theology as an assimilative and participatory practice⁶⁵ is connected to the rise of the distinctively modern university in the eighteenth century with the advent of

the ideal of autonomous science, of scholarship, proceeding under no other canons than proper evidence. With this came historical sense and historical-critical methods of interpretation. And these things in turn revolutionized the human and historical sciences into disciplines (sciences) in a new sense. A science was a cognitive enterprise working on some discrete region of objects under universal and critical principles. One result of this revolution was that new sciences, new bodies of data, and new methods were available to theology: philology, history, hermeneutics. In the mid-eighteenth century, Ernesti and Semler appropriated these for biblical interpretation. And once this happened it became apparent that the Bible itself could be the object of a ‘science,’ a collection which critical, autonomous methods of interpretation could be applied. It was only a short step to realize the same thing was true about church history, about preaching, about dogmatic theology.⁶⁶

Thus, when the University of Berlin was founded in 1810, it included a department of theology with a faculty divided into four distinct disciplines, each pursuing distinct ends and employing its own idiosyncratic methods. These disciplines are easily recognizable because they continue to shape theological education to this day: “Bible, systematic theology, church history, and practical theology.”⁶⁷ According to David Kelsey, theological education, at least in America, has long been in a state of confusion. Although many schools would claim that their objective is the transformation (both moral and intellectual) of their students, theological curriculum as a whole and the pedagogies applied in the classroom, are clearly patterned on the Berlin model of theological

⁶⁵Farley does not use the terms, “assimilation” and “participation.” Rather, he speaks of “*paideia*,” which conveys the same meaning.

⁶⁶Farley, *Theologia*, 41. Farley’s book is a modern classic for anyone interested in the nature and practice of theological education today. While I share his conviction that a return to *theologia* as *paideia* is much needed, my own proposal goes further than his in the respect that I make a concrete recommendation for re-integrating the various sub-disciplines of contemporary theological education around the *ordo* of the ancient fourfold method of biblical interpretation. See my recommendation, in the next section of this paper, that all theology should be conceived, once again, as biblical interpretation.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 49. Farley and others tell a fascinating story of Frederick Schleiermacher’s influence on this form of theological education. In addition to Farley, *Theologia*, 73-98, see Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate*, 12-19.

education.⁶⁸ In consequence, a theological education today, whether at the undergraduate or graduate level, often has the feel of an

aggregate of more or less independent disciplines, each of which has its method, bibliography, history, scope, current issues, and so forth. Although these disciplines tend still to be classified in the traditional fourfold pattern, they are further dispersed into ten to fifteen areas of teaching: education, preaching, counseling, religion and society, ethics, historical theology, Christianity – and courses, New Testament, Old Testament, various courses covering church history, black studies, feminist theology, church administration, worship, etc.⁶⁹

For the average student, a modern theological education will seem like a “mélange” of unrelated introductions. Accordingly, Farley suggests that theological education, in the classic sense of *paideia* or assimilation to God, “is virtually impossible” in the current context.⁷⁰ Gavin D’Costa likewise suggests that “theology, properly understood, cannot be taught and practiced within the modern university.”⁷¹ John Webster states the problem succinctly when he suggests that theological education is “increasingly alienated from the subject matters and the cultural and intellectual processes of the Christian religion.”⁷²

Not only has theological education internalized the rationalism and the subjectivism of the enlightenment, it has also become increasingly disconnected from the ecclesial and liturgical contexts within which knowledge of God is truly possible. Thus, it is perhaps fair to say that theological education in an academic context has become, basically, nonsensical. What is a theologian to do?

Toward a *Ressourcement* of Theological Pedagogy

I offer the following recommendations as a way, merely, to begin the conversation. First, I should say that no amount of tinkering with theological curriculum in an academic setting will suffice if the practice of theology is disconnected from the worship and witness of the Church. I obviously do not have the space here to treat the complex issue of the relationship between ecclesial traditions and academic institutions, though this is a terribly important matter. So long as formerly Christian universities continue to drift away from their ecclesial roots, any true *ressourcement* of theological education will necessarily take place in

⁶⁸Ibid., 1-28.

⁶⁹Farley, *Theologia*, 14. Cf. Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 17-72.

⁷⁰Farley, *Theologia*, 16.

⁷¹Gavin D’Costa, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy and Nation* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 1.

⁷²John Webster, *Theological Theology: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered before the University of Oxford on 27 October 1997* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 3. Elsewhere, Webster writes that “Christian theology is governed by the commanding, revelatory summons of God’s presence. It takes place within the sphere marked out by that general presence; and, if it withdraws from that presence or falls into an attitude of anything less than fear of the holy God, then it has simply stumbled into absurdity.” Idem, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 14-15.

some other context besides the modern university. Theology, in an academic context, only makes sense if it is practiced in the service of an ecclesial tradition where the knowledge pursued can be properly directed toward its “liturgical consummation.”⁷³ For those theological programs that remain connected to and draw their identity from their service to a specific sponsoring church or even to a broader network of churches⁷⁴ there may be hope for a reformulation of the theological curriculum so that the knowledge pursued and the pedagogies employed are well-suited to a biblical epistemology that assumes that knowledge of God entails assimilation and participation.

Second, theological educators need to be clear about the epistemological pre-conditions that make their work possible. This will often mean that biblical scholars and theologians need to be re-aculturated, to a certain extent, since they may have been educated within a context heavily invested in the modern project, with its ideal of free and rational enquiry. Theology, as John Webster has noted, “is not free.”⁷⁵ Rather, theology remains necessarily bound to “the Church’s tutelage because it can only fulfill its office if it is instructed by immersing itself in the intellectual and spiritual practices of the *sanctorum communio* in all their variety.”⁷⁶ There is no magical solution to this problem. Rather, those involved with theological education will need, simply, to be intentional about assessing the epistemological presuppositions that guide their work in and out of the classroom. In many cases, this may require ongoing faculty development work – perhaps focused retreats and hopefully an eventual appraisal of whether the curriculum, as it now stands, is well-suited, pedagogically, to form students in the knowledge of God.

Third, theological educators need to be realistic about what can be achieved in undergraduate and seminary contexts even in the best of schools with the strongest ecclesial support. The classical association of *theologia* with *paideia* should remind us that knowing God through assimilation and participation isn’t something to be achieved in several years of academic study even if we manage to connect the classroom with the dorm-room for a more holistic approach. Rather, the knowledge of God requires a lifetime of study⁷⁷ within the context of ecclesial communities that have become a living *leitourgia* of God’s salvific work in history.

⁷³Obviously, I have borrowed this phrase from Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Challenges in Contemporary Theology; Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). Interestingly, Gavin D’Costa argues that theology is impossible in the modern university, and instead of suggesting some sort of solution to this problem, he calls for the creation of entirely new kinds of universities. See his *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy and Nation*, 5. Cf. Webster, *Holiness*, 2-3.

⁷⁴Baylor University, for instance, continues to serve the Baptist tradition, though, of course, not exclusively. Wheaton College, in contrast, has a broad constituency of northern evangelicals despite the fact that it is not connected to one particular ecclesial tradition.

⁷⁵Webster, *Holiness*, 2.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*

⁷⁷And I mean this in the classic sense of “studium,” an impassioned search for God that involved the heart as much as the intellect. This understanding of study has, unfortunately, become “culturally obsolete,” Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 14.

The academic study of theology can play a part, but only a part, within a broader ecclesial framework. As things now stand, the best of theologians may be doing little more than introducing their students to a beautiful ecclesial dream that will never materialize in reality with students coming from and returning to the various kinds of impoverished churches dominating the cultural landscape. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges to theological education may be the chaotic state of the ecclesial institutions needed to sustain them. If we are serious about teaching theology, then perhaps more theologians should leave the academy and commit to serving the church in more direct ways.

Fourth, there was a time when all theology was “a vast commentary on Holy Scripture,”⁷⁸ and there is no reason why it should not be so still.⁷⁹ Indeed, it must be if it hopes to remain truly theological. Since the *telos* and governing principle of theology is the knowledge of God, then Sacred Scripture, as the primary mediator of the revelation of God, must always remain central. What this means is that, if any of the so-called theological “disciplines”⁸⁰ such as ethics, history of Christian thought, historical-critical biblical exegesis, practical ministry, or intercultural-studies pursues some other kind of knowledge (besides the knowledge of God) as its ultimate end and employs methodologies that are suited to this autonomous knowledge, then the place of these “disciplines” in a theological curriculum should be reconsidered.⁸¹

⁷⁸Daniélou, “Les orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse,” 9.

⁷⁹The suggestions that I make in this section are, as far as I know, unique. Indeed, as I’ve investigated the curriculum of theological schools in researching this paper, I’ve encountered none that follow an *ordo* based upon the four-fold method of biblical interpretation. However, I was not surprised to discover in a recent book recommending a retrieval of ancient catechetical practices, that a very similar *ordo* is found in the great catechetical resources from the patristic through the modern ages. For instance, Augustine, in his *Enchiridion*, recommended that candidates for catechesis learn the basic narrative (literal sense) of scripture before progressing to focus on faith (allegorical sense), love (tropological sense), and hope (anagogical sense). The same basic structure is found in the major catechisms of the reformation era as well as in the contemporary catechisms of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. See J. I. Packer and Gary A. Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 86-87. While I am not suggesting that theological education is essentially catechesis, I would argue that theological education and church catechesis have the same ultimate end, which is the knowledge of God. Indeed, theological education in an academic setting can be conceived, largely, as preparing, not catechumens, but future catechists.

⁸⁰I have disciplines in scare quotes because there was a time when these studies were not conceived as autonomous disciplines. Rather, they were sub-divisions of the general discipline of *theologia* and were thus employed in pursuit of the knowledge of God as their ultimate end. See Farley, *Theologia*, 27-72.

⁸¹I am not arguing for a form of theological education that eschews knowledge from other academic disciplines. I would suggest only that, as theological interpretation is brought into a dialogue with other disciplines, it must remain truly theological, remembering that “knowledge of God” is its ultimate aim. I am in full agreement with Edward Farley when he suggests that theological interpretation “must discern the way tradition and its symbols are connected to world (and human) structures, and this requires knowledge of those structures. World structures and operations are the very subject matter of the sciences, natural, social, and humanistic. For instance, the sociology of human community will be useful though not sufficient or autonomous in the understanding of the ecclesial community (ecclesiology).

This is hardly to suggest, however, that theological education should not include the aforementioned fields of inquiry. Rather, it means that these fields of study should be re-conceived as sub-disciplines (or specialties) within the more general discipline of theology, whose *modus operandi* is inextricably linked to the knowledge of God acquired through the spiritual exegesis of Sacred Scripture. Although this sounds, perhaps, like a minor and trivial suggestion, it is not. What I am suggesting is that theological education should be re-configured so that spiritual (or *theological* if you prefer) exegesis is once again synonymous with the practice of theology. The purpose of a theological education should be the development of competent interpreters of scripture—interpreters seeking to be formed in the knowledge of God and equipped to form others likewise.⁸² All other fields of inquiry should be reconceived so that they serve this exegetical and assimilative task. I am suggesting more than an emphasis on the “theological interpretation of scripture.” I am suggesting a return to the idea that theology *is* the interpretation of scripture, if it is truly theology.

Historical theology, moral theology/ethics, practical theology, intercultural studies and world religions⁸³—all of these and other sub-disciplines are not only helpful to, but are perhaps necessary for, an engagement with Sacred Scripture in search of the knowledge of God. Indeed, if scripture is the vehicle through which the church comes to know all things in the light of Christ, then all forms of study may be conceived within the framework of biblical studies. To be sure, biblical studies, because it is concerned with the knowledge of God, will necessarily have an interest in all fields of study.

There is good precedence for such a re-configuration. Indeed, whether we are speaking of St. Augustine, St. Jerome, St. Gregory the Great, the Carolingians, or the school of St. Victor, patristic and medieval theologians approached every field of inquiry as a kind of “preparation for Bible study.”⁸⁴ In

Fundamental ontology of human being will be operative in the discernment of what sin and evil do to human being. Hence, a working knowledge of the sciences and their mode of thinking, including philosophy, both linguistic and ontological, is indispensable to self-conscious and critical carrying out of theological reflection.” *Ibid.*, 183.

⁸²“The church fathers recognized that good interpretation is most likely to flow from a good person. Patristic exegesis was, finally, a religious exercise. Right reading was a fruit of righteousness” (O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible*, 23). For more on the necessity of righteousness for good theological interpretation, see the chapter titled, “Theology and Sanctity” in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology, I: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 181-209.

⁸³For an argument in favor of incorporating the study of world religions into an explicitly “theological” curriculum, see D’Costa, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy and Nation*, 145-76.

⁸⁴Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 37. This was, of course, Augustine’s contention in the *De Doctrina Christiana*, where all of the arts were conceived as preparation for exegesis. Augustine’s thesis was profoundly influential in the Latin west during the Middle Ages. For a fine treatment of this influence, see Edward D. English, ed., *Reading and Wisdom: The De Doctrina Christiana of Augustine in the Middle Ages* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). I should also note that Hugh of St. Victor

appreciation of this classical approach, Hugh of St. Victor, in the twelfth century, protested the potential divorce between biblical commentary and the *Quaestiones*, which had long served merely as a gloss to Sacred Scripture. Beryl Smalley suggests,

As a scholar, [Hugh] appreciated the modern development of the liberal arts, with its stress on dialectic; he saw that the commentary on Scripture was turning into a collection of *Quaestiones* and had a rival in the sentence book, while the Fathers taught that all science ought to serve as an introduction and guide to Bible study. Hugh's problem, therefore, was to recall rebellious learning back to the scriptural framework of the *De Doctrina Christiana*, adapting the teaching of Rome and Carthage to the very different climate of twelfth-century Paris.

Hugh did not attempt to fight the development of the sentence book or the increasing interest in classical learning. Yet, he was convinced that the "supreme object" of theological studies "was union with God through prayer and meditation on . . . the Scriptures."⁸⁵ Accordingly, he proposed in his *Didascalicon*⁸⁶ that all of the twelfth century's emerging studies be incorporated into the framework of *lectio divina*, and thus the traditional senses of scripture.⁸⁷ For Hugh, a proper biblical education should begin with all of the arts and sciences necessary for reading and comprehending the biblical texts.⁸⁸ Only then should the formal study of scripture proceed with the literal sense.

In relation to the literal sense, Hugh recommended the careful study of those biblical texts which form the backbone of the biblical drama (the rule of faith) beginning with Genesis and ending with the Gospels and Acts.⁸⁹ With an understanding of the biblical drama, students were then ready to move on to the allegorical sense of scripture and especially to the most obviously theological biblical texts such as the Gospel of John, the Epistles (especially those of Paul), and the book of Revelation. Subsequently, students were to read Old Testament texts that best foreshadow the coming of Christ, such as Isaiah, the Psalms, Wisdom Literature, the Law, etc. As an aid to the allegorical and thus Christological and ecclesiological meaning of these texts, students were introduced to the more systematic doctrinal teaching of the book of sentences as well as to works on the theology of sacraments.⁹⁰ Hugh had much less to say about the tropological sense because he believed that it pertained to virtue and was less a

amended, without contradicting, Augustine's teaching on this issue in important ways. This is a matter which deserves greater attention by scholars who are not medieval specialists.

⁸⁵Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 86.

⁸⁶For the most recent translation, see Hugh of Saint-Victor, *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts* (trans. Jerome Taylor; New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

⁸⁷This is the subject of Book 6 in *ibid.*

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, Books 1-3.

⁸⁹At the end of Book 6, Chapter 4, Hugh recounts the rule of faith in beautiful detail, beginning with creation and fall and moving through the high points of the OT, through the incarnation, and finally mentioning the Christian hope for Christ's return in glory. *Ibid.*, 138-39.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 139-44.

matter of study and more a matter of contemplation and meditation. He seemed to suggest that the tropological sense required the student to take the Sacred Page out into the world where “every nature tells of God; every nature teaches man; every nature reproduces its essential form, and nothing in the universe is infecund.”⁹¹ For Hugh the student is ready for the tropological sense when she can enter the world and “see everywhere the divine face.” Hugh made no mention of the anagogical sense, though its subject matter would have been included under the allegorical sense in his approach.

I would argue that a similar “*ordo*”⁹² for theological education would be fitting in our own time, though the details would obviously be quite different. As in Hugh’s day, a consistent and ordered procession from the literal, through the allegorical and into the tropological would lead students deeper into scripture and provide a unified framework for conceptualizing the goals of each course in the curriculum. As general preparation, ancient languages and a solid foundation in the arts is indispensable. Following Augustine, Hugh believed that all of the arts offer preparation for biblical interpretation, and theology students could be encouraged and prepared to understand courses outside of the department in this same way.

Regarding the literal sense, an understanding of the rule of faith through a careful engagement of key biblical texts is as important now as it ever was, though it is strangely neglected in many biblical courses with a historical-critical focus.⁹³ In service of a better understanding of the literal sense, studies of ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman history and culture are entirely fitting so long as they are not employed in service of a historicist agenda but rather in service of the rule of faith and the spiritual senses. With regard to the three spiritual senses, it is perhaps true that all of the sub-specialties in a theological curriculum may contribute to their deeper understanding.

Courses in the history of Christian thought and ethics/moral theology would offer a wonderful means of exploring, further, the allegorical, tropological, and anagogical senses. I currently teach a survey course in the history of Christian thought, for example, and the course never moves away from the main concerns of the Christian faith flowing from Sacred Scripture. I suspect this is entirely typical of such courses taught in a confessional context. Augustine’s *City of God*, for instance, has a great deal to teach us about the anagogical sense of scripture as do the works of Joachim of Fiore, the sixteenth-century Radical Reformers, nineteenth-century liberals, and many more. Likewise, the early creedal tradition is obviously indispensable for an understanding of the allegorical sense just as the second century martyrs and Christians from every century can contribute to our exploration of the Bible’s tropological sense. This is not to suggest that historical studies are less important than previously thought. Rather, it is simply to clarify the real end of historical studies as a part of the

⁹¹Ibid., 143.

⁹²Here again is a word often used by medievals and certainly Hugh of Saint Victor. In this context, it suggests an ordered procession from simple to more complex studies with advancement measured by the end pursued—an assimilative and participatory knowledge of God. See Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 30-33.

⁹³For more on this problem, see Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 1-324.

theological curriculum—they make us better readers (as members of the *sanctorum communio*) of scripture and thus serve a pedagogical purpose for those seeking the knowledge of God.⁹⁴

In addition to more advanced studies on the literal and spiritual senses, more “practical” courses focused on preaching, evangelism, discipleship, etc., should perhaps come during the final terms of a formal theological education, since they can be fitted easily into this framework, serving as pedagogies of assimilation and participation through their engagement of Sacred Scripture and hopefully helping students learn to take the sacred page out of the classroom and into the world, as Hugh of St. Victor recommended for students of the tropological sense.

It would be easy to imagine a theological curriculum designed specifically around the *ordo* of the senses of scripture and employing the talents of a variety of specialists. Such a program would be explicit in its affirmation that the knowledge of God is its ultimate end and governing principle. It would strive to protect the cohesiveness of its curriculum by wedding its students to the Sacred Scriptures and keeping them focused on assimilation to and participation in the Triune God of glory. Such a curriculum would not necessarily require radical changes – just a much more explicit acknowledgement and ongoing articulation of the fact that “*theologia, id est divina scriptura*” and that Sacred Scripture is better conceived as a sacrament of salvation than as a source of revelation.⁹⁵

Conclusion

Regardless of the merits or shortcomings of this or other particular proposals, theological education remains in a state of confusion, and a radical reassessment of the ends and means are in order. What I hope to have accomplished with this rather ramshackle survey is a convincing argument that theological education must, necessarily, be ordered by the knowledge of God as understood in Sacred Scripture, and that the Church’s great tradition offers helpful guidance for anyone willing to take up the challenge.

⁹⁴Perhaps even Free Church Christians could be convinced of the importance of “tradition” if it were conceived less in association with a distinct discipline (historical theology) and more as an exegetical method (a very thorough gloss for our own day), which is a more traditional way of conceiving it in the first place – think of “scripture in the tradition.”

⁹⁵This was a common view for Hugh of St. Victor and the Augustinian tradition within which he worked. Indeed, as the reader moved through the senses of scripture, a conversion was underway that is, in many ways, analogous to the consecration of the host in the Eucharistic liturgy. Just as the bread is turned into body, so the text is consumed by and in turn consumes the reader, transforming her into a member of the ecclesial body – the *corpus verum*. A comprehensive and spirited review and retrieval of this notion (that Sacred Scripture is like a sacrament) for our own time would be, I believe, extremely fruitful and would potentially enable us to move beyond the notion that there are multiple “sources” of authority. But this is a matter for another essay.

Theological epistemology thinks on these things in relation to the knowledge of God. The qualifier "theological" highlights a key question: is the Augustine's dense treatise *On the Trinity* makes several bold moves in the direction of a properly theological epistemology, one that spells out the epistemological significance of particular doctrinal topics. Augustine's analysis of the Trinity allows him to provide a distinct (and surprising) theological understanding of the "subject" and "object" of knowledge: the knowing human subject becomes the object of God's self-revelation; the "object" of knowledge, God, is known and loved through God (i.e., in Christ through the Holy Spirit). *The Knowledge of God: An Essay on Baha'i Epistemology*. BY JACK McLEAN. T. Religion, the theological state, was nothing more than a primitive stage in the evolution of mankind that sought to explain the phenomena of nature as interventions of the gods. Mankind, Comte thought, having nearly outgrown its religion, was on the threshold of the positivistic state, the last and highest stage in mankind's development, the stage of the real, certain, and useful. 19. The three traditional proofs for the existence of God are ontological, God as necessary being; cosmological, God as creator or first cause; and teleological, God as the divine mind or supernatural designer of the universe. 'Abdu'l-Bahd uses all three in *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 3-7. Biblical Epistemology and Pedagogies of Assimilation Scholars have long noted that the Hebrew verb, *yada* (to know) suggests much more than theoretical apprehension of an objective reality. "To know," in the Hebrew sense, indicates understanding through personal experience. Mary Healy explains that, in the Old Testament, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34, no. 4 (January 1, 1981): 289-312. The epistemology of Deuteronomy is thus assimilative and participatory. It is assimilative because Israel knows God only as its own communal identity is conformed to God's ongoing story of redemption. It is participatory because Israel can be assimilated to God's story of redemption (and thus God's will) only by living according to the Torah.