



Piety, Narrative, and Christian Identity

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“Piety is the foundation of all virtues.” That Ciceronian sentiment penned in the first century B.C.E. was a commonplace of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. And yet such high praise of piety sounds foreign to the ears of persons reared in modern culture. Our attitude toward piety is more likely reflected in the irony of a venerable Spanish proverb: “Never leave your corn to dry before the door of a pious man!” We have learned to be wary of the profession and practice of piety, expecting it to be a pretense which hides some secret passion or arcane fanaticism. Indeed, the second definition of the word “pious” offered by Webster’s *New Collegiate Dictionary* is “marked by sham or hypocrisy.”

It is odd that piety has come to connote that which is false and external, because the term was used in post-Reformation Christianity in an attempt to recover an authentic religion of the heart. Pietism, the movement spawned by Philipp Spener’s *Pia Desideria*,¹ directed its sharpest criticism against the externality of doctrine and ritual. Piety in contrast to such empty externals was the true conviction of the heart which manifested itself in a disciplined moral life. Spener’s reform had as its goal the instilling of “an earnest, inner godliness.”² Unfortunately the excesses and intolerance of the 18th and 19th century inheritors of pietism have shrouded the term piety in an unwholesome cloud. We are more likely to associate pietism with witchcraft trials than with the institution of Bible reading and family devotions in the home.

It may be that the term “piety” is no longer useful to describe the authentic spiritual life, but there are aspects of the term’s 17th century usage that deserve our careful attention. Spener’s central teaching was that “it is by no means enough to have knowledge of the Christian faith, for Christianity consists rather of practice.”³ It is this key claim of pietism—that Christianity is essentially

¹Philipp Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964).

²Ibid., 47.

³Ibid., 95.

a practice—that I want to investigate in this essay. If Christianity is a practice, then the formation of the Christian life becomes the central task of the Christian community. Everything within the community should be directed toward the edification of Christian identity. Theology as a crucial activity within the Christian community should also serve Christian practice. But how? Theology is commonly understood as a theoretical activity, and its relation to the practice of the Christian life is often unclear. I want to examine the relation between theology and Christian practice—or more precisely stated, between Christian theorizing and the formation of Christian identity. If we

take seriously the priority of the practical within Christianity, how will this affect our conception of theology? How can theology serve the formation of Christian piety? How can a theoretical activity contribute to the practice of Christian faith and life? I will argue that the key to an appropriate understanding of theology and practice lies in a fuller appreciation of the *narrative shape* of the Christian life and of Christian theorizing. Narrative is the crucial category for reuniting the theoretical and practical in the Christian community.

I. THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE: THE PROBLEM STATED

The suggestion that theology ought to serve Christian practice is hardly a novel proposal. Most contemporary theologians would undoubtedly accept such a general statement about theology's purpose. The more perplexing issue is how precisely theology and the Christian life should be related in order to enhance the formation of Christian identity. The problem is heightened by the fact that the activities of doing theology and living the Christian life appear so different or even opposed. Theology is a form of theorizing and bears the marks of all theoretical activity. It strives to be methodologically self-conscious, objective in evaluation, and abstracted from the confusing ebb and flow of everyday life. The activity of living the Christian life is less easily defined precisely because it is saturated with the ambiguity of the everyday. Christian practice is deeply influenced by custom and habit and is thus much less self-consciously methodic than theology. Christian practice is a self-involving activity which does not prize objectivity and abstraction so highly. While it is difficult to produce an exhaustive list of the characteristics which distinguish theoretical and practical activities, our common-sense assumption is that they differ in kind. And ever since the Greeks first distinguished *theoria* and *praxis* we have associated objectivity and reflection with the former and subjectivity and self-involvement with the latter.

The dilemma facing the theologian who seeks to unify theology and Christian practice is twofold. First, these two different and sometimes opposing activities must be brought together within a single framework. Second, they must be related in such away that priority is granted to the practical. The difficulty is immediately obvious. How is one justified in granting priority to the activity characterized by custom, habit, and subjectivity? Surely priority ought to be given to theology with its goal of self-conscious objectivity. Only such a reflective activity would seem capable of giving normative guidance to practical action. Surely Christian life requires a norm abstracted from the ambiguity of the

everyday by which to orient itself, a norm which must be discerned by theology. But if theology plays such an important role, how can it honestly be said that theology *serves* Christian practice or that the practical ought to have priority within the Christian community?

The complexity of this dilemma is most clearly revealed when we see how it shows itself concretely in the thought of a particular theologian. No theologian has had a greater influence on the development of modern theological method than Friedrich Schleiermacher. Most twentieth century theologians have followed his methodological lead, and those who have resisted his influence have, nonetheless, been absorbed in criticizing him. Schleiermacher is especially important for our purposes, because he viewed himself as an heir of the pietist tradition. He held practical theology in the highest regard and restored the term "piety" to a place of honor in

theological vocabulary. But Schleiermacher resisted the anti-intellectual tendencies of the pietist tradition and attempted to combine within a single method intellectual rigor and practical relevance.

I hope to show in the following section that Schleiermacher's noble attempt to combine theory and practice does not fully succeed. He fails because he adopts a view of theory which undermines his intention to give priority to the practical. Schleiermacher adopts the view that theoretical philosophical inquiry is *foundational* in character, i.e., that it seeks to provide a universal justification for Christian faith. Consequently philosophical theology, the most abstract and formal inquiry, becomes the key theological discipline. Subtly but decisively theology is transformed from a practical study assisting the formation of Christian identity to a theoretical study seeking the universal form of religion. As long as theology continues to adopt a foundational view of theory, it will be unable to escape from the dilemma which plagues Schleiermacher's thought.

II. THEOLOGY AS FOUNDATION: THE CASE OF SCHLEIERMACHER

"Theology is a positive science, whose parts join into a cohesive whole only through their common relation to a particular mode of faith, i.e., a particular way of being conscious of God."⁴ With this definition Schleiermacher combines theory and practice in an ingenious manner. Theology is a *science*, i.e., a rational theoretical inquiry characterized by self-conscious reflection and objectivity. But theology, in contrast to other theoretical disciplines, is a *positive* science, i.e., a rational study which is justified by the particular goal it serves. That goal of enhancing faith or God-consciousness provides the unity for the various methods operative within theology. Philosophical, historical, and practical theology may differ sharply with reference to method, but they are unified in that each seeks to facilitate greater consciousness of the believer's relation to God. Consequently theology is practical in that its *goal* is to enhance the consciousness of God in the Christian life; theology is theoretical in that its *method* bears the marks of an objective scientific inquiry.

The distinction between goal and method would seem to be an apt solution to the relation of theory and practice. But Schleiermacher does not reckon

⁴Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology* (Richmond: John Knox, 1966) 19.

sufficiently with the fact that scientific pursuits have goals which are independent of the particular subject matter they study. Insofar as a science *seeks* universal acceptance of its conclusions, such universality is a *goal* of scientific inquiry. And it is possible that the scientific goal of universality may conflict with a positive goal such as the edification of God-consciousness. If the scientific and positive goals do conflict, which is to be given precedence?

Schleiermacher does not provide an explicit answer to that question. His statements regarding the relation of theory and practice seem to presuppose the congruence of scientific and positive goals. When the two are in agreement, clearly primacy of place is to be granted to practice. Schleiermacher's well-known declaration "practical theology is the crown of theological study"⁵ illustrates his commitment to the precedence of the practical. But a close look at his method in operation reveals that when theory and practice *conflict*, greater weight is to be given to theory. Logical priority in Schleiermacher's system belongs to the scientific investigation of

philosophical theology. Theology as a science must seek the universal foundation of religious practice, for without such a foundation the practice of religion has no ultimate justification and no norm to guide its development. Though Schleiermacher fully intends to stress the priority of the positive practical goal, his conviction that theology is a scientific foundational enterprise finally thwarts his intention. In the end the scientific and theoretical gains precedence over the positive and practical, and the crown passes from the head of practical theology to that of philosophical theology.

Philosophical theology must articulate the norm which is to guide the religious life by discerning the universal foundation of piety. The theologian surveys the diversity of voices manifest in worship, teaching, proclamation, and prayer and seeks to discover the “common element” in these “diverse expressions of piety.”⁶ This “self-identical essence of piety” then serves as the basis and norm for all further development of religious practice. The philosophical theologian is charged with no less a task than discovering the universal essence of religion which will provide the ultimate foundation for belief and action. All concrete expressions of piety are to be evaluated with reference to this universal essence. Only those practices which accord with this philosophically discerned essence are authentically religious.

Philosophical theology thus becomes the crucial normative discipline within the church. It determines the essence of faith and the standard by which expressions of piety are to be evaluated. Without theology’s foundational investigation, Christian practice remains blind and aimless. Because of the importance of its task, the reliability of theology’s method becomes all the more important. If theology is to provide the foundation and norm for Christianity, then its method must be rigorously scientific. Inexorably the scientific theoretical side of Schleiermacher’s definition of theology begins to dominate the positive practical dimension. Ironically the theoretical must predominate so that philosophical theology might render its service to the practical life. In order to serve as critic and reformer of Christian practice, scientific theory must be granted ultimate priority over the very practice it seeks to serve.

⁵Ibid., 125.

⁶Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 12.

A scientific inquiry seeks conclusions which are formal, universal, and atemporal. Theology as science thus seeks an essence of religion which is beyond the particular influence of history and culture (formal), which is applicable to all persons in every time and circumstance (universal), in a realm beyond the ambiguous ebb and flow of temporality (atemporal). Schleiermacher’s own attempt at philosophical theology in paragraph four of *The Christian Faith* exemplifies these three characteristics of scientific investigation. But precisely as scientific rigor is gained, theology’s relevance for the practical Christian life appears to vanish.

In an argument which is both elegant and complex Schleiermacher seeks to define the universal shape of piety:

the self-identical essence of piety is this: the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or, which is the same thing, of being in relation with God.⁷

Schleiermacher designates a universal human experience, the consciousness of being absolutely

dependent, as the foundational experience of all religious piety. All human beings have a consciousness of their absolute dependence, i.e, an experience of being dependent for their very existence upon a source outside themselves. This experience is not one of dependence upon any finite object in the world, such as our feeling of dependence upon parents. In every *finite* relation we always exert some reciprocal influence upon the other person and thus are never *absolutely* dependent. But when we ponder the whole of our active and passive existence, we experience ourselves as ultimately dependent and in relation to an other. This other, however, is not a finite object or person, but the source of all possible persons and objects, God.

Through this ingenious movement of thought Schleiermacher is able to identify a universal human experience as the experience of a relation with God. Every human being is in relation to God, and that essential God-consciousness can be discovered simply through a careful examination of our humanity. Though Schleiermacher begins by examining the diverse expressions of Christian piety, he concludes by discovering the *universal* form of human piety. Only such a universally applicable argument is sufficient to establish the foundation and norm for Christian practice.

It is important to realize that Schleiermacher claims to have discerned the *formal* shape of piety, i.e., piety-as-such, prior to its combination with particular historical or cultural elements.⁸ The essential shape of piety is always the same; it is the experience of absolute dependence. Every authentic religion will manifest piety's formal essence but will combine that essence with different particulars derived from different cultures and historical periods. Christianity shares with Islam and Judaism the God-consciousness implied in absolute dependence but differs from both in being a religion of redemption in which all

⁷Ibid.

⁸“The self in question here is the self that is not qualified by or determined by specific objects and energies located in its world. It is the self in its original identity, in its being-in-such-and-such-away (*Sosein*)....Piety or religion is the name of the level of self-consciousness that is most decisive of all....It is a consciousness of the self prior to all of its specific social and practical relations.” Richard R. Niebuhr, *Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion* (New York: Scribner's, 1964) 183-4.

things are related to Jesus of Nazareth.⁹ Schleiermacher is clear, however, that those Christian particulars do not grant religious experience its universal foundational character. The essence of piety is foundational and normative for Christian thought and practice because it is purely formal.

The final key characteristic of universal God-consciousness is its *atemporality*. Schleiermacher characterizes the feeling of absolute dependence as an “immediate” experience, by which he means an experience that cannot be grasped under the usual categories of space and time.¹⁰ The experience of God-consciousness has a purity which transcends common experiences of particular objects and particular times. God-consciousness is a pristine experience which defies easy categorization with cognitive concepts. Though language requires that we use categories to speak about it, the feeling of absolute dependence can never be reduced to the concepts we use to communicate it. God-consciousness takes us beyond the cognitive world of distinct subjects and objects, of particular times and places. But precisely because this experience is pre-cognitive and atemporal it is always momentary and fleeting. For as soon as we begin to reflect upon or speak about it, we lose its pristine quality.

Once this universal, formal, and atemporal essence has been discerned, it becomes the standard by which all Christian thought and practice is judged. All doctrines and proposals for action which purport to be Christian must be shown to be expressions of the feeling of absolute dependence. Schleiermacher argued, for example, that the doctrine of the Trinity should not be included within the corpus of Christian doctrine because it “is not an immediate utterance concerning the Christian self-consciousness.”¹¹ As this example shows, the essence of piety as discerned through theology’s theoretical inquiry is both the foundation and norm for all that transpires within the Christian community.

Schleiermacher’s theological method is brilliantly conceived and has been justifiably influential. I do not intend to offer anything like a thorough criticism of his method but hope simply to point to some internal tensions and problems in his position. As I have shown, the most obvious difficulty in Schleiermacher’s approach is that he has effectively reversed the relation between theory and practice. Clearly theology has become the foundational discipline which analyzes, criticizes, and reforms Christian practice. Despite Schleiermacher’s praise of the practical, the theoretical discipline of theology now wears the crown of pre-eminence. The relation between theology and practice is straightforward and undialectical. Theology is the judge and reformer of practice, and practice seems unable to challenge or reform the theoretical investigations of philosophical theology.

The key element in this reversal of theory and practice is Schleiermacher’s conviction that the theologian must provide a universally valid foundation for the Christian community. Christian practice, moreover, must be given a theoretical justification which is independent of Christian particulars. The unspoken assumption is that a formal and abstract argument possesses greater validity

⁹Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 52ff.

¹⁰Schleiermacher’s clearest statement on this matter is found in his second speech on “The Nature of Religion” in *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958) esp. 45-54 and 87-101.

¹¹*The Christian Faith*, 738.

than one that is particular and concrete. Schleiermacher’s acceptance of that assumption leads him to embark on his search for the universal essence of piety. But that investigation yields an abstract account of a universal experience that seems barely relevant to the formation of Christian identity. While Schleiermacher surely intended theology to guide Christian practice, his emphasis upon the formal and universal elements of piety runs counter to his own intention. Schleiermacher’s view of theology as foundational threatens to turn the discipline into an abstract and arid study far removed from preaching, prayer, worship, and sacrament. Given the predominance of Schleiermacher’s method among contemporary theologians, perhaps it is not surprising that we find ourselves in a perpetual quandary as to how theology ought to serve Christian faith and life.

III. THEOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN IDENTITY: FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING

If theology is to be more closely integrated with the practice of the Christian life, then some common patterns of thought associated with the foundational view of theology need to be

overcome. Theology ought not be contrasted to Christian ministry in a manner analogous to the contrast between theory and practice. Most theory/practice models conceive of the two activities as qualitatively distinct and grant reflective superiority to theory. When this distinction is applied to the Christian context, it distorts the essential unity shared by theology and the activities of Christian ministry. The theory/practice distinction elevates theory to a position of abstract reflection which obscures theology's practical intention. Theology, like all activities within the Christian community, has a single ultimate goal, namely, to sustain and nurture Christian identity. With reference to this goal theology does not differ at all from the "practical" activities to which it is often contrasted, e.g., preaching, teaching, and counselling. All these activities are carried out in order that believers might gain a deeper realization of the Christian identity bestowed upon them at baptism.

The theory/practice contrast seems appropriate only when theology is conceived in a foundational mode. A theology which seeks the universal essence of piety-as-such requires a kind of reflection foreign to preaching or counselling; such a theology is formal, abstract, and distanced from its subject matter in order to achieve the objectivity appropriate to a scientific inquiry. But precisely when theology is conceived in this way, it becomes least able to aid in the formation of Christian identity. If theology is to be an identity-forming activity, then it must give up its pretensions to be a foundational inquiry seeking the universal form of religion.¹²

I am not denying that theology involves rational reflection or that some canons of objectivity are appropriate to it; I am simply trying to distance theology from a particular conception of theoretical reflection which has distorted theology's practical intention. Critical thinking can make an important

¹²For an analysis and criticism of philosophical foundationalism in theology see Ronald F. Thiemann, "Revelation and Imaginative Construction," *The Journal of Religion* 61 (1981) 242-263 and N. Woltersdorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

contribution to the development of the Christian life, but that contribution is threatened when theology seeks to offer a universal theoretical justification for the Christian faith. When theology accepts this foundational role, it inevitably embarks upon a "transcendental" exploration, i.e., it seeks the conditions of the possibility of Christian faith and action. Or put differently: when foundational theology comes upon the various expressions of Christian faith and life, it asks, "how is this possible?," and sets out to find a theoretical answer to its question. Even if it were possible to answer such a question, it is not at all obvious what relevance that answer would have for Christian identity. The questions of identity are "who am I?" and "who am I to become?" The transcendental answers of foundational theology hardly seem appropriate to those questions.¹³

The first step in developing a non-foundational view of theology is to recognize the inescapable temporality of theological thinking. Foundational theology seeks an atemporal essence which is prior to all historical and cultural particulars. While such views acknowledge the temporal and historical, they constantly seek the essence of faith in an unchanging realm beyond the transitory. To reject a foundational view of theology is to reject the search for atemporal essences. Theology is a thoroughly historical discipline which does its work in the midst of a community and its tradition. Such a theology acknowledges the diversity of expressions of Christian faith at any given time and throughout the development of the Christian

tradition. It sees temporality as a crucial dimension of Christian faith as a living, developing social phenomenon. Non-foundational theology accepts the culturally conditioned character of all human knowledge (including the knowledge of faith) as a sign that the transcendent God has become incarnate in human history and culture.

This renewed sense of temporality means that theology has a special relation to tradition. Tradition has been well defined as “an historically extended, socially embodied argument.”¹⁴ The Christian tradition is comprised of those voices of the past and present which debate the true nature of the Christian faith. Theology is not intended to be the arbiter among such voices, but the vehicle by which the arguments are voiced. Theologians carry on the conversation not from a privileged position above tradition but from within the polyphony of voices which constitute the Christian community. Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Schleiermacher, and Barth are among those voices, but so are the professor of theology at Luther Northwestern Seminary, the pastor of Grace Methodist Church, and the Book of Common Prayer. If the voice of the theologian is to be given greater weight in this conversation, it is not because he or she possesses a privileged office but simply because the voice is persuasive and worth hearing.

Theology must then presuppose tradition because tradition *is* the living developing Christian community. In the same sense theology presupposes faith and seeks through critical reflection to understand that faith more fully. Anselm’s description of theology as “faith seeking understanding” continues to

¹³Cf. the discussion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) 27-37.

¹⁴Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981) 207.

provide an apt account of the theologian’s task.¹⁵ The theologian speaks from within the community of believers and thus speaks from the commitment of faith. The theologian cannot adopt a standpoint of radical doubt or assume a hypothetical position of neutrality vis-à-vis the Christian faith. The theologian is seeking neither to justify nor disconfirm that complex phenomenon we call faith. The theologian strives simply to *understand* through critical reflection. The process of understanding may yield a radical criticism and reinterpretation of tradition, or it may result in a confirmation of many ancient formulas. The outcome of theological investigation cannot be predicted in advance precisely because the theologian operates within the temporal ebb and flow of history and community. But the goal of theology remains constant, namely, to understand more fully and more critically the Christian faith in order that the community might better exemplify the Christian identity to which it has been called.

It may appear that the view of theology I am recommending denies that theology is a normative discipline. The apparent advantage of the foundational position has been its claim to discern the unchanging essence of Christianity which then serves as the norm for Christian thought and action. If theology rejects foundationalism, then isn’t the church left without a standard for evaluating the many voices within the tradition? That is an important question, and I cannot deal with it fully in this context.¹⁶ But some comment is appropriate here.

The idea that we can discover the true essence of Christianity beyond the confusing din of cultural and historical voices is a tempting notion. But that is finally all it is—a temptation that we need to reject on philosophical and theological grounds. The post-Hegelian discussion in

philosophy has raised serious questions about the possibility of discerning atemporal transcendental essences.¹⁷ But even if the philosophical discussion were not decisive, the theological objections to foundationalism are. God's revelation has come to humanity through the history of the people of Israel and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The heart of the Christian gospel is that God has made himself known in human reality, i.e., historical and cultural reality. God continues to manifest himself through the reality of his created order—through the words of proclamation and the water, bread, and wine of sacraments. We must seek the heart of the gospel within human reality and not beyond it. God is revealed precisely where he has chosen to hide himself, within the “masks” of his creation.¹⁸ Foundationalism is finally a sophisticated “the

¹⁵“Proslogion” *St. Anselm: Basic Writings* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1962) 1-34. Two modern restatements of Anselm's position deserve special mention. Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (Richmond: John Knox, 1960). Barth develops the full methodological implications of Anselm's phrase. David Burrell, “Religious Belief and Rationality,” *Rationality and Religious Belief* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1979). Burrell offers a formulation of Anselm's principle which is not subject to the usual criticisms of “fideism.” Note especially the interesting notion of “pragmatic implication.”

¹⁶This issue will receive much more thorough treatment in my forthcoming book, *Revelation and Theology: the Narrative Shape of Christian Imagination*.

¹⁷Of the many discussions of this issue see especially Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1979).

¹⁸“The whole creation is a...mask of God.” Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Luthers Works*, Volume 14 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964) 95.

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ology of glory” which like all such theologies lures us into thinking that we can storm the heavens with our clever minds. We must rather be content to remain in history, to hear the voice of the gospel in proclamation and the biblical narrative, and to struggle to discern his word for the church. The theologian does have a norm by which to work—the gospel as proclaimed in biblical narrative. The theologian has no privileged access to the gospel's essence but must hear it as all Christians do through written, spoken, and sung words. Informed by Christian practice, yet critically reflecting upon it, the theologian seeks to articulate the gospel so that through it God might mold our Christian identity. Informed by theology, yet not determined by it, the Christian community continues to be a tradition, an ongoing conversation about the nature of the Christian faith and life.

IV. NARRATIVE, THEOLOGY, AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Since non-foundational theology emphasizes the temporality of human life, it is natural that “narrative” should emerge as its organizing category. If theology is to be a normative discipline, it cannot simply echo all it hears in the ebb and flow of history. The theologian must find a way of organizing the diverse witness of Christian history which respects its temporal character. Moreover, the mode of organization must ultimately serve the formation of Christian identity. Narrative becomes the key category because its structure incorporates temporality in the element of *plot* and assists the formation of selves in the element of *character*.¹⁹ As Stephen Crites has argued, “Narrative alone can contain the full temporality of experience in a unity of form.”²⁰

Narrative orders our experience through the development of plot. Our ability to “follow” a story depends upon the unique combination of succession and configuration within the plot.²¹ Narratives move temporally; that is, events succeed one another in a temporal fashion. But mere succession does not enable us to follow the story. The events must be configured into a coherent whole which organizes the events without destroying their temporal succession. Successful narratives pull us along by creating expectations in the reader that the narrated events are moving toward some end or conclusion. To be sure, there is no straight-line progression of events to expected conclusion. Good stories are filled with the unexpected, the sudden turn of plot, the coincidence—what Frank Kermode has called “peripeteia”²²—as they move toward their endings. And yet when the conclusion has been reached “it all fits,” i.e., the configuration of events makes sense from the vantage point of the end. This quality of *ordered temporality* makes narrative a valuable tool for theology, for it provides a

¹⁹Cf. Stanley Hauerwas with David Burrell, “From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics,” *Truthfulness and Tragedy* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University, 1977) 15-39.

²⁰Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971) 303.

²¹See Paul Ricoeur’s helpful discussion of this point in “The Narrative Function,” *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1981) 274-296.

²²Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (London: Oxford University, 1967) 18.

structure by which the theologian can interpret the diverse landscape of historical experience.

Narrative also provides the crucial category for the discernment of personal identity. Characterization is the second important element of narrative structure. Through the interweaving of setting and event a narrative depicts the actions of characters. In a realistic narrative characters are caught up in contingent events remarkably similar to those which mark our own lives. As we see the characters act and suffer within the framework of the plot, we come to know and understand them. Again expectations are created in the reader as we anticipate the reaction of a character to an unexpected twist of plot. The term “character” is intentionally ambiguous, for it can describe both an actor in the narrative and certain traits of that actor which are “characteristically” human. In coming to know George Smiley in John Le Carré’s novels we discover something of the traits of patience, persistence, and loyalty. And in so doing we learn more about ourselves, particularly whether we exemplify a similar character. Narratives thus present patterns of characteristic action which depict personal identity. The characteristic unity which allows us to speak of a person’s identity in the midst of the diverse actions he or she performs is related to the configural unity of plot. Both plot and character are what Kermode has called “concordant-discordant wholes.”²³ Despite the variety of action and event, finally a unity is discernible in both. And the unity of character is what we call personal identity.

This general discussion of plot and character shows how narrative analysis can be useful for a non-foundational theology, but certain aspects of the theological use of narrative deserve more careful attention. Narrative gives the theologian a structure by which to interpret the temporality of human life in a way that contributes to the formation of Christian identity. But clearly the theologian is in a different position from that of the novelist, who can simply create an imaginative configuration to depict a meaningful world with realistic characters. Clearly there are countless potential narratives which can be told to make sense of our lives; the novelist is limited

only by the constraints of his or her imaginative power and the readers' sense of plausibility. By contrast the theologian seeks to offer a narrative interpretation which is not only coherent and elegant but peculiarly Christian as well. The theologian stands within a community and its tradition and speaks not only personally but also for the community. While the theologian's account will inevitably bear the marks of individuality, that account must finally accord with *the Christian narrative*, i.e., that "discordant-concordant whole" which identifies the community as being distinctively Christian.

Certainly there are difficulties in speaking of *the* Christian narrative, as the historical critics will be quick to tell us, but the notion cannot be discarded simply because we recognize the diversity within Christian tradition. If Christianity is a community with a discernible identity, then there must be a story

²³"That the concordant tale should include irony and paradox and peripeteia, that making sense of what goes to make sense should be an activity that includes the acceptance of inexplicable patterns, mazes of contradiction, is a condition of humanly satisfactory explanation." Ibid., 163. In his more recent book, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1979), Kermode stresses far more the dissonance and obscurity of narrative.

which depicts that identity. This story is certainly no seamless whole—but then no good narrative is! While the Christian narrative cannot simply be equated with the biblical narrative, the grand narrative configuration of scripture is a key part of the overarching Christian story. The biblical texts depict the world within which Christian identity is to be sought. The accounts of God's action from creation through the election and history of Israel and culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ provide the essential clues to the identity of the Christian community and of the God who brought it into being.

Surely there are difficulties facing a theological interpretation of Scripture, particularly the danger of imposing a premature narrative unity on these complex texts. Despite such dangers, theologians must continue to seek the configural unity of the biblical witness, recognizing that good narratives are always discordant as well as concordant. The biblical narratives depict a world in which God and human beings interact. Often the actions of the human characters seem designed to flaunt the intention of the creator. At other times the plot takes such bizarre twists that no narrative unity seems apparent. Yet despite (and often because of) "peripeteia" in the development of plot and character, the narratives move toward a discernible conclusion. And as they do, the meaning of the overarching narrative begins to emerge. Occasionally the narrator will offer an explicit interpretation of the action, but more often the meaning is carried through narrated action and dialogue.²⁴ Like an exceptionally rich novel the biblical narrative provides the structures of plot, characterization, and setting which serve as the clues to the texts' meaning. But the act of interpretation is finally ours, and my argument in this essay has been that such interpretation is the central theological task. Standing within the complex of Christian tradition, theologians need to risk interpretation of the biblical narrative in order to provide proposals for Christian belief and action.²⁵ The interpretations and proposals will differ, but that is to be expected within any living tradition. No single interpretation can ever claim to have discerned *the* Christian narrative, but all strive to be faithful expressions of it. The Christian narrative is a story which can never be fully told, for it is the story of a community which has not yet reached that

telos for which God intended us. But we are not bereft of guidance, for in the biblical narrative, and particularly in the account of Christ's resurrection, we glimpse that end which awaits us. Until we reach that appointed end we continue to tell the story and seek to exemplify the Christian identity depicted therein. The Christian narrative is thus the story *we tell* in part—haltingly and piecemeal in worship, preaching, and theology; and it is the story *we shall be told* in full, when the tale is complete, and we meet its Author face to face.

²⁴See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

²⁵I am *not* arguing that theological assertions should take narrative form. Theologians are not story-tellers; rather, theologians need to use narrative analysis in order to interpret the stories which form the basis for theological assertions. The assertions themselves may take the discursive form usually associated with dogmatic theology.