

INTRODUCTION

The theme that unites these essays is speech. It is a theme that is woven in different ways (and in admittedly more and less obvious ways) throughout what follows. I have brought together these writings hoping that they will prove useful for students and practitioners of theology and ethics who are looking for a display of the difference Christian ways of speaking make to the ongoing life of the church in our time.

Christian speech is more normatively prayer, liturgy, and hymnody than it is theology. It is also more straightforwardly witness. When Christian communities speak the gospel, they are performing the truth of their assertions in such a way that their speaking and performing are integrally related. Theology serves this enterprise, thinking the thoughts that undergird the faithful deployment of this task, but can never presume to replace it. As a parasitic discipline, therefore, theology is not just conditioned by its referent—God—but aids a mission: making intelligible the ways that the church must speak if it is to be speaking the gospel. As such, Christian speech is not a deposit—a timeless and frozen vocabulary that trades in erecting fixed structures and impressive systems. There are at least three reasons for this, and they correspond to the ways that Christian speech will display humility, patience, and loyalty.

First, it is true that we love our words. God knows we want them to achieve quite a lot. We have no shortage of words, and they seem to come to us with such ease and in such abundance that it can take some time before we begin to wonder whether we are often just making noise. Certainly we are reluctant to give our words back to God; we would rather keep them and use them for ourselves. But such use will only distort the speaking mission of the church, and so calls for humility. After all, Christians have been invited to speak about things that are beyond words. We speak “God” but are aware that God is a reality that surpasses all terms the definitions of which we are otherwise confident. The problem is not only

that what Christians mean by “God” is not shared by everyone else but also that Christians are enjoined to make use of such words even when they refer to something that they cannot contain. And even though we may be driven to silence in the face of God’s ineffability—and appropriately so—the Christian community is not permitted to persist that way. I imagine “speak thus” to be God’s command to arise from our fitting silence with words that we would not have had if they had not been given to us. Theology must always be prayerful if it is to be true, because we are driven to pray through the chastisement of our speech. Prayer names our refusal to keep our words for ourselves. It is nothing other than the remarkable trust that despite our silence, God would nevertheless have us speak again. The Christian ability to hear “speak thus” as an invitation to speak again will be a function of a humble recognition that we were foolish ever to love our words as our own.

Second, Christian speech can never be thought of as the exclusive property of the church. If the divine Logos, in the incarnation, enters the world as a man, then Christians are permitted to have confidence that the words they must speak about him can likewise enter hostile territory. And its movements from place to place will be marked by the patience necessary to discover the words that are needed in order to say *here* what was said *there*, in order to say *now* what was said *then*. This means that theology will be ongoing: so long as the church has a mission that is still in effect, there will be a theological task. The redemption of the world is partially served by the redemption of the world’s ways of speech, which theologians make use of as they seek to animate countless new cultural and linguistic idioms for the sake of the mission that is alive and at work in those idioms.

Christians share words with those outside the church; how could they not? But not all language is equal. Much of what Christians say will be misunderstood by a world that, though it hears familiar words, will not always readily comprehend the unfamiliar message that those words articulate. In his book *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, Robert Louis Wilken observes that from the beginning Christian ways of speaking were funded by the richness of Scripture’s language. “What the Bible spoke of could not be expressed apart from its unique language and its singular history.”¹ For example, Wilken notes that God’s nature may be described

1. Wilken, *Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 76.

by Plotinus as “inexhaustible infinity” and “boiling over with life,” or by Gregory of Nyssa using the biblical language of “living water.” And yet the question is not simply which choice of language better expresses things. Instead,

What is significant is that “living water” is found in the Bible and would always be found in the Bible. Metaphors and images and symbols drawn from elsewhere, no matter how apt, do not stir the Christian imagination in the same way as those drawn from the Scriptures. . . . Because the words of the Bible endure, they provided scaffolding on which to construct the edifice of Christian thought.²

Christians do not claim to know the nature of God apart from language like “living water.” Their preference for one form of language over another does not come from standing neutrally before all linguistic options and freely choosing from among them. The church’s missionary task depends on its ability to stand on the scaffolding of God-talk that speaks more truth than we can know even while commending that truth to those outside the church by experimenting with different language.³

The patient work of God’s people who nevertheless keep speaking is itself part of the gospel’s witness to the world. And just as the words God invites us to speak are gifts, so also the patient church will not be surprised when its struggle to proclaim the gospel in a new time and place yields insights about its own message that it had not seen before, but that are exposed precisely within and by the new language it is making use of. This is the patience to receive unexpected gifts in the confidence that God’s Logos precedes the church’s mission, going before and ahead of it in the world. In *Speak Thus*, I have included “On Hauerwas and Yoder” because it investigates the ways that these two theologians similarly, but at points differently, propose to negotiate questions about the kind of public voice the church ought to have. “Democracy Beyond Democracy,” a response to Jeffrey Stout’s penetrating book, *Democracy and Tradition*, is a test case for the ways such a voice may be made to function within modern, democratic discourse. These engagements and

2. Ibid., 77.

3. In his prologue to *On Christian Theology*, Rowan Williams speaks about theology’s “communicative” mode in this way.

negotiations are located within the church's ongoing mission, but beyond the work of theology proper.

Even so, if theology too is ongoing in this same sense, then surely it will also come to an end. It will have nothing left to say, nothing else to do, when the mission it serves is finished. When all of creation is enfolded in the divine embrace and ceaselessly finds itself in prayer and praise, theology will cease. Christian speech that is schooled in patience and exercised by receiving unexpected gifts from surprising sources will be better equipped to stop doing theology and start singing. Which means, of course, that theologians *especially* had better start singing now. This book is meant to help us see the madness of ever thinking otherwise.

Third, while the Christian mission—served by theology—advances with a fresh message that is forever good *news*, never expiring or becoming “old news” and therefore always timely, it is always rightly tied to its own past. The mission does not begin from scratch with every new generation and the latest environment. Each setting will present new challenges, but the ability of the church to identify its addressing them as part of its continuous mission will, at least partially, owe to its continuity with where its mission has carried it thus far. When theological discourse has not shied away from its own tradition, it has not always done so for this salutary reason, perhaps often misplacing its confidence in the frozen details of its carefully worked out schemas. But this is only one way and one reason to appeal to the authority of the tradition. We may be much more sanguine about the debt we owe to it since it is only on the basis of having learned to speak one way proficiently that we may, with confidence, improvise—linguistically and otherwise—in a new setting. I am calling this aspect of Christian speech “loyalty” in order to stress the limits to which Christians rightly submit their freedom, out of trust that the church God has created is not forever being abandoned over and over again.

The disunity of the church as it now exists obviously raises an acute difficulty with respect to this claim. But even so, our loyalty to a divided church will surely demonstrate our hope that God has not abandoned it even though we will find ourselves nourishing and nourished by a loyalty to something that does not now fully exist. Improvising on the basis of such a fractured tradition may, therefore, strike us as deplorably reckless. How can we, with confidence, advance the mission of the church in the world, a mission whose advance demands sharp skills honed by practice, when we are seemingly so ill-equipped? How can Christians be ready

to face uncertainty when they can only claim a relatively feeble formation? I admit that I do not have a dazzling answer to this except to ask, what else can we do? The church advances with the church it has, not the church it wants. And what is even more frightening is to consider that maybe the church we want is not the church God wants. After all, we will surely want a church that is stronger than God has promised; we will be tempted to turn the advance of the Christian mission into a crusade. “Sheep among wolves” (Matt 10:16) is not only a horrific image; it is also the church’s program of dispossession, certainly of violence, but perhaps also—painful as it is—of the unity we seek.

Still, all of this talk can give the impression that God actually *has* abandoned the church to flounder with limited resources, to make the best of less than ideal circumstances. But if the church finds itself in situations it can only describe in this way (as I believe it must in twenty-first-century America if it is going to speak truthfully), then this may not be an indication that God has abandoned it, but precisely that God is present to it, holding forth a unique challenge not to look elsewhere. I have included “Story and Eucharist” in order to show how Swiss Anabaptists in the sixteenth century found the resources they needed to carry on despite a fractured and fracturing church. I am aware that the Anabaptist tradition is often thought of as “reckless” and as anything but loyal. But with the help of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s account of the relation between language and practice, together with George Lindbeck’s work in *The Nature of Doctrine*, I hope it will be evident that such recklessness is not finally careless. Christian loyalty to our forebears will mean looking for and expecting to find the resources that we thought we could do without, that we thought we abandoned for good reasons in our attempts to be “relevant.” This book endeavors to affirm ways that Christians are rediscovering these resources in the realization that nothing, in fact, could be more relevant to a world that is perishing without the humble, patient, and loyal witness of God’s people.

BECOMING TRUTHFUL

God speaks first. Only then do Christians share in the speech of God, the speech that creates and continues to uphold creation. And the way Christians do this is by sharing in the church. In the book of Acts, the sign of God’s creation of the church is the tongues of fire that accompanied the

gift of the Holy Spirit that fell on the gathered disciples-turned-apostles. In an important sense, the tongues of fire *are themselves* the gift of the Holy Spirit insofar as the apostles were given the spirit of Christ, the word of God. When the church speaks, therefore, not only does it speak by the power of the Holy Spirit, but its very speech is the *action* of the Spirit. This is to say that the speech that creates the church is continuous with the language that the church is invited to inhabit in its proclamation to the world.

We can make some sense of this dual claim christologically. Christians confess that Christ is the Word of God, the agent of creation, the one by whom and for whom everything that exists, exists. In the incarnation, the word became flesh, and yet the word has been raised from the dead; the ascension of the Word into heaven did not permanently remove the word from the earth. Just as Christ was incarnate by the Holy Spirit, he was once again made present in the world by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. *That* word is simultaneously the church itself and the church's proclamation. Put differently, the risen Christ has a body, and that body is the church.⁴ But the church can never exist apart from its proclamation since the latter is also the word of God by which the church is constituted. This means that the church is only church insofar as its very existence attests to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. For this reason, Robert Jenson is right to follow the Vatican II documents in describing the church as a kind of sacrament. Since a sacrament both points to and is the thing it signifies, we may say that "the church points to Christ and so—and only so—is Christ."⁵ When the church ceases to point to Christ, it becomes just another club, embarrassingly evacuated of its identity and purpose.

A community's ability to abide in the speech of God will depend on its ability to inhabit the truth of its words. By drawing on some aspects of Radical Orthodoxy and insights from narrative theology, "Narrative Proclamation and Gospel Truthfulness" asks about the kind of knowledge Christian witness names and the status of its truth. I show that our ability to give an accurate rendering of these things is hampered both by modern epistemology and by the ways that such accounts are ineluctably bound up with sovereign power and the legitimacy of state violence.

4. Jenson, "Church and the Sacraments," 209.

5. *Ibid.*, 212.

In contrast, when Christians confess (in both senses of the word), we are being the most truthful, as Augustine maintained. We are caught up in an activity whose truth is larger than our abilities to assent with full knowledge to the objects of our confession. The confession of God's glory in adoration, and of human sinfulness in penitent sadness, both confront the Christian with what is real and true. Words of confession spoken back to God constitute the highest instance of truth telling. This does not mean that nothing else Christians say can be true, but that the truth of anything else that may be spoken will derive its intelligibility from lives otherwise rooted in the life of a community that openly subjects itself to the linguistic discipline that worship names. So while Christian speech—the offering of God's words back to God—may never constitute all our speech this side of heaven, it nevertheless is paradigmatic for understanding how we ought to relate to words generally.

Human speech is not “natural” since we do not naturally turn to God in worship, preferring idols instead. We do not naturally want what is not natural to us. But saying this can also distort the complex relationship between nature and grace. “Forester, *Bricoleur*, and Country Bumpkin” investigates this complexity in the moral thought of Thomas Aquinas, and “This is My Brother's World” examines nature and grace in relation to creation. While not always explicitly making reference to Karl Barth, these chapters both present Barthian readings. Interrogating the complexity of nature and grace hopefully clarifies some things, but I will not pretend that this necessarily makes the task of Christians any easier. Even though we may not naturally want what is not natural to us, part of the Christian hope must be that God's grace is not ultimately at odds with our nature. We have a complicated task even though God's gifts for abiding in the speech of God have already been given; they are available to be used. If the church's first mode of speech is its praise and adoration of God, it learns how to speak through worship and liturgy. Its ritual performances are often partially linguistic. The church at prayer and the church at proclamation are two different things even as they enrich each other, just as it is impossible to imagine a church that only prays and does not proclaim, or vice versa. The reading and hearing of Scripture is more than an exercise in literacy since we must be taught how to read *Scripture*, how this reading differs from reading the newspaper or a novel, how we ought to relate to what is read, why it has authority over us, and how to keep reading the parts we particularly do not want.

Singing, of course, is a particularly involved form of reading, which reminds us that Christian ritual performances are also partially bodily. Christians continue to read and sing *all* the psalms and not just the ones that bring us comfort or conform to our tendency to think of ourselves as generally righteous. For example, by persisting in singing “Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” (Ps 137:9), we learn that we cannot escape singing these words *as our own*. We cannot pass them off as somebody else’s words—words of someone more depraved, less righteous, more in distress, less comfortable. And we come to learn this partially through the act of singing them since our whole bodies are enlisted in making this declaration. Our singing is itself also disciplined by the variety of things we are made to sing, especially those things we would not have chosen to sing on our own.

Even though our ritual performances are both linguistic and bodily, these two are not finally separable since it is our bodies that speak when “we” speak. We are therefore habituated into a style of speaking that is itself a style of being in the world. In other words, Christians have not so much been told what to say; we have been taught how to speak: shown style and cadence, trained in the ways to intone and inflect.

POSITIVE SPEECH AS RESISTANCE

An additional element animates the essays compiled here. I hope that what I have to say in *Speak Thus* will be thought of as *positive*, by which I mean that they acknowledge and explore the positive existence of the church in the world. Questions about Christian identity and integrity will not be answered by a defensive church that takes antagonism with the world as a first principle, its agenda forever being shaped in response to crises in the world. This is not to say that Christians ought to be insular or to disregard worldly crises; but it is to say that so long as Christian existence is determined by such crises, the world is without its best hope. For example, Austrian filmmaker Hans Weingartner portrays a compelling drama of youthful enthusiasm for social justice in his 2004 production, *Fetten Jahre sind vorbei*.⁶ He explores the revolutionary spirit behind a small group of twenty-somethings dedicated to bringing down capitalism, one rich person at a time. In one of the film’s more wistful moments, Jan, the most wide eyed of the bunch, is offered a mind-numbing narcotic

6. Weingarten, *Die Fetten Jahre sind vorbei*.

but declines it, urging that drug use dampens the revolutionary drive. He cannot compromise the work that needs to be done for the cause, and so his mind and body must be kept alert. Jan is not *against* drugs; he was *for* the revolution.

Christian reflection would benefit from just so positive an account of the *raison d'être* of Christian mission: a way of life so riveting on account of its endlessly fascinating object and absorbing purposes that all subsequent behaviors, attitudes, and modes of being are taken into its account. Nancy Reagan cheated a generation of American schoolchildren when she exhorted them, "Just say no to drugs." The grandness of the "no," with all of its clear-sighted, oppositional resonances, however, was not how she cheated them; it was the enervating "just." That "just" signified that there is no revolution, no way of life worth living that makes drug use unthinkable. Swords are not beaten into ploughshares by a people who "just" reject war, but by a people who would rather farm. What American children needed was not Mrs. Reagan's moralistic rule but another option—a positive activity so compelling that many others become distractions. Children were absorbed with drugs not out of ignorance or perversity but out of boredom; Mrs. Reagan's "just" only reinforced that boredom. Christian ethics has too often assumed that the Christian life is just as boring as the after-school hours in America. Boredom, of course, is just another way of indicating a lack of imagination.

In the last half century, philosophical reflection on language, ethical retrieval of virtue, and a certain kind of sociological and ethnographic investigation have led to an emphasis on practice. Jan's revolution, like athletics for American children, is a practice in this sense. Such practices invite systematic reflection for discovering the resources that they offer for resisting competing practices too easily taken for granted and insufficiently resisted by more direct methods. In this book, I hope that it will be evident how much we still have to learn from the practices we have been given and, in particular, how they enhance the church's witness through their own integrity.

But I also suspect a danger in too readily reaching after practices, Christian or otherwise. This can surely invite descriptions of varying depth, which can be a problem since we do not know, in any obvious way, how to speak about what we are doing. When in "Metaphors we Die By," for example, I discuss the practice of caring for the ill and dying, it is the very description of that practice—the metaphors employed in

describing—that comes into question in the hopes of suggesting that our descriptions are also partially constitutive of what it is we are doing. So whereas Christian care for the ill may sometimes look just like everyone else's care, the ability to narrate it differently is both a function of and a contribution to its very real difference. As I suggest in that chapter, non-violence will be bound up with Christian care of the sick, and not only linguistically.

Nevertheless I have not gone out of my way to describe these essays as “ethics.” There are two reasons for this. First, as an academic discipline, ethics still too often can take itself to be a primary set of concerns. Questions about how to live (questions too often divorced from a consideration of the traditions to which such commitments belong, from the character of the communities that share in and therefore extend those traditions, and the virtues engendered by active membership in them) somehow continue to pass as “ethical.” Second, though I will reluctantly accept the nomenclature of ethics even while protesting its impoverished nature as it is still usually conceived, my preference for advancing and engaging the language of the Christian faith as a first-order discourse cannot accurately be described as anything but theology proper. I am quite happy with this categorization, especially as it aids in emphasizing a point made from the opposite direction, namely, that Christian theology never exists for its own sake. It may never busy itself with intellectual games and academic exercises with an end in view that only leaves more work for other academics. After all, as I have already intimated, theology itself is tied to the church's proclamation and, as such, inherently resists being turned in upon itself. The sermons at the end of this book are intended to display this. I like to preach and am always grateful for the chance to do it. As a lay theologian, I know that preaching is not my primary work if for no other reason than that I must be invited to preach by those for whom it is their primary work. But by including sermons in this book, I hope to indicate that the line between theology and the proclamation it is meant to enable should not be one that is easily drawn.

It may sound absurd, but theology is for the world. Yet it is only ever for the world inasmuch as the church continues to try to speak about God truthfully. I trust that such comments make it clear that an emphasis on the church's own speech must never be described as parochial. The quality of the church's discourse must instead always depend on the manner in which it is spoken *for the sake of the world*, but not by way of taking

the world's speech as a starting point since the world does not have the word of God, absent the witness of Christ in the church. The separation of proclamation from theology, therefore, impoverishes both proclamation and theology. Christian theology, like Christian ethics, is one way that the church is reminded that it does not exist only for itself. But only to the extent that the church continually refines its life together—in order to inhabit its linguistic habits to serve its life together as a primary way of speaking—will it have anything worth saying to the world.

SAMPLE