

# Preface

## **Staying in Touch**

This book is intended to give the reader an opportunity to see what happens at the crossroad of the theological academy and the parish.

We two authors met in divinity school, back in the salad days, when the future was a limitless horizon of possibility. It was there we both fell in love with theology, enjoying the luxury of being students, able to immerse ourselves in this new language until we were fluent enough to join the conversation. We found that it was possible for theology to be reflexive, a dialogue of give-and-take between the needs of the church and the demands of doctrine. These conversations about theology were inspiring; and as we moved into distinct professional lives, we assumed they would continue.

After graduation, we discovered the ugly truth: real life in the church and in the academy is a far cry from the fantasy we'd imagined in seminary. It turns out there are many forces that pull pastors and professors in different directions. Pastors are consumed with the tasks of ministry, serving as preacher, teacher, administrator, counselor, and (if necessary) janitor. Theological study and

reflection often give way to more pressing issues, like recruiting Sunday school teachers or balancing the budget. When a pastor manages to carve out a moment for study and reflection, she discovers that academic theology is rarely written in an inviting and accessible way. Out of school, we pastors can lose our facility with theological language, and the categories and issues become fuzzy.

The academic's life has its own obstacles and challenges. Professors are often consumed with committee work, efforts to meet the needs of students, and the ongoing task of keeping current in the field while also participating in a high-level intellectual discussion of contemporary theology. Furthermore, when it comes to publications, attending to the needs of the church isn't necessarily rewarded professionally.

Luckily, the bonds of friendship kept us from losing touch with one another, despite our different vocational demands. Now, fifteen years later, the ongoing theological conversation between a pastor and a professor has become part of our everyday lives. And while we are far from the idyllic place we imagined in seminary, we've discovered that there is something essential and life-giving to be gained when pastors and professors discuss theology.

This book is not a constructive systematic theology—a new and comprehensive account of the doctrines of Christianity. Nor is it a pastor's reference book that will provide quick resources on how to navigate specific difficulties within a congregation. And it is definitely not a self-help book for pastors, professors, or Christians in general. Instead, it is an example of what can happen when academic theology and pastoral experience intersect and engage one another. Our objective in writing this book is to invite others—pastors, professors, and laity—to join in the conversation.

Even in writing this book, we have different aims. Shawnthea, the senior minister of a United Church of Christ (UCC) church, hopes to model how a pastor can act as a translator between

academic theology and the everyday realities of Christian life. As a pastor, she speaks both languages. She can hear in the intellectual discourse of theology the insights that offer real resources to her parishioners and then communicate these insights pastorally so they can be heard and incorporated into a life of faith. At the same time, she can identify the theological issues just beneath the surface in everyday congregational activities, articulate what is at stake, and pose these pressing questions to theologians. Shawnthea aims to do this work of translation in a way that does not lessen the rigor of theology or simplify the messy reality that is the life of the church.

Shannon, a theology professor, wants to model a practice of bringing the history and framework of systematic theology to bear on issues that confront Christians today. She sifts through the historical developments of doctrine, the conceptual frameworks of Christian beliefs, and the current situations in which Christians find themselves in hopes of identifying pertinent connections among them. As a teacher, Shannon strives to encourage and equip her students to think carefully, creatively, and critically about the roles Christianity plays in our contemporary world, broadly understood. This includes how the ideas and customs of Christianity function in political discussions, what visions of God are implicitly operative in American consumer culture, how thoughtful congregations could communally discern faithful responses to social injustice, and what shapes Christian engagement with the world.

These goals may sound lofty, but they really boil down to getting thoughtful people to talk about the real issues that arise in the course of living as Christians, and to do so with as many theological resources as we can garner. In the chapters that follow, we address specific Christian doctrines, offer resources, and make connections between academic theology and church life—all with an eye toward bringing the two closer together.

The reader will note that we speak in two distinct voices. Shannon speaks as an academic, offering information, ideas, questions, and ways of thinking about each topic. Shawnthea speaks as a pastor, reflecting carefully on the ways that these topics play out and influence the lives of people in her congregation. Shannon uses longer words; Shawnthea tells better stories.

Shannon's work complicates things. She rejects simplistic answers, emphasizes the multiplicity of Christian beliefs and practices, and underlines the historical specificity of different ways of thinking. To someone looking for the one answer, Shannon offers many answers, new questions, and reasons to be suspicious of singular approaches.

Shawnthea does not simplify things. Rather, what she does is show how an awareness of theological complexity can nurture a faith that is resilient, supple, and coherent. She demonstrates that complexity is not confusion and models the pastoral effectiveness of a rich and nuanced understanding of Christianity.

## **A Word to Theologians from Shannon**

This kind of dialogue is valuable to theologians who are committed to Christian faith and to the church for three reasons. First, the questions we ask are vital to the communities to which we hold ourselves accountable. The second reason has to do with the very nature of Christian theology. Christian theology is not the philosophical belief system of an individual believer, plucked from the atmosphere or discerned through mathematical equations. Christian theology is a kind of knowledge that is communally held, generated, and performed in and through the life of concrete Christian churches. Attempts to separate out formulaic beliefs or reduce the rich complexity of how Christian communities know into a straightforward philosophical system diminish the thick reality of

Christian theology into a thin sliver of thought. Trying to make sharp distinctions between what Christians think about God and how they worship together, act in the world, teach their children, and so on results in a woefully incomplete view. Thus the very knowledge that Christian theologians seek cannot be found apart from the life of the church. It makes sense, then, not only to participate in the church but also to talk about theology with ministers and parishioners.

The third reason this kind of conversation is valuable for theologians concerns the pervasive influence of Christian theology. Christianity influences much of our shared world, including contemporary political, economic, military, and social realities. Yet often our public discussions about these aspects of life do not inquire into the roles Christianity plays or do not answer such inquiries adequately. This means that many people who study these various issues miss part of what is really going on because they overlook the influence of Christianity or fail to grasp its complexity. It also means that many Christians are never invited or challenged to bring their faith to bear on their understanding of the rest of the world. In public discourse, Christian voices are most often heard on only a handful of hot-button issues labeled as religious, such as abortion, homosexuality, or creationism. Then the discussion tends to stagnate at a very low level, so that only one Christian perspective is heard and the theological and pastoral complexities of the issue are completely avoided. Many other issues that are deeply theological and relevant to Christians (such as immigration, health care, social security reform, etc.) are rarely addressed in a public forum from perspectives of faith. Because of all of this, there has been a growing recognition in recent years that America needs more public theologians. We need theologians who can help analyze public events theologically, raise the level of public discourse about religion in general and Christianity in particular, and

encourage all Christians to think carefully and critically about the engagement between faith and public life. There have been influential intellectual public theologians in the past, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King Jr., and Karl Rahner. Yet today there is a lack of this kind of theological engagement.

Theologian Rosemary Carbine argues that the first step toward doing public theology is to create a public, that is to help foster a community that can engage in that kind of discourse.<sup>1</sup> If we want a higher level of theological conversation to happen in the public forum in America, we need to provide resources to help people engage in such conversation. This means offering, in an accessible form, at least an introduction to the history, conceptual framework, and language of theology. Conversation between pastors, theologians, and laity can be very beneficial to theologians in helping to create an informed and engaged public in which public theology can happen.

One further note. Up to this point I have used the term *theologians* to refer to professional academics who teach and write theology. Yet one of the goals of my own work—in teaching, writing, and this book in particular—is to encourage many people to engage in the work of theology: to talk about God, to question how visions of God shape our communities, and to wrestle with the issue of how the holy and the human interact. As leaders of communities of faith who daily articulate understandings of God, pastors are already knee-deep in the work of theology. Anyone can be a theologian; pastors must be theologians.

## **A Word to Pastors from Shawnthea**

Let's face it. Theology is like a foreign language to most pastors—we learn it in school but quickly lose our facility for it when we don't use it. But the truth is that if you can learn to understand

contemporary issues in theological terms, you can bring two thousand years of wisdom to bear on real-life problems. The Christian tradition thus becomes a remarkable resource for meeting the challenges of modern life. Having a more robust understanding of theology also allows pastors to identify what is at stake in the life of the church and the various issues that arise. Personally, it is easier for me to determine which battles are worth fighting and which small changes will have large impacts if I can see what theological issues underlie the day-to-day challenges that emerge in parish life.

Yet the best thing about ongoing theological engagement is that it produces a consistent faith, which enables a pastor to respond to questions, concerns, or events in the moment. A well-developed theology gives rise to a sort of theological instinct, so that off-the-cuff responses, daily decisions, and unconscious attitudes all express a coherent, thoughtful, and faithful view of God.

I would also add that laypeople benefit as well, for if pastors can teach parishioners how to think theologically, they can begin to see their everyday lives as the realm of God's ongoing activity. Thus equipped, Christians are able to enter into the theological conversation on their own.

## **The Structure of This Text**

In each of the chapters of this book, we address a particular topic in Christian theology that we think is important today. Shannon offers theological frameworks and resources for addressing this topic, as well as introducing some tools and concepts that are crucial for theological inquiry. Shawnthea explores how these theological structures and ideas might play out in the life of the church.

Chapter 1 focuses on creation. Shannon interprets current debates about creationism and evolution as deeply intertwined with how Christians understand the Bible and what we are looking for

in this text. She suspects that people who occupy the extreme positions in this debate (in which a literal reading of the Bible rejects any kind of evolution, or in which evolutionary science rejects any kind of creation) share a common desire for certainty that is a characteristic of the modern period in the West. The question then arises, is certainty what the Bible offers or what Christianity is about? The resources offered in this chapter include brief descriptions of modernity and postmodernity, as well as a discussion of biblical interpretation. Shawnthea then translates these resources into a sermon on the creation texts of Genesis, pastorally shaping the questions of what kind of knowledge the Bible offers us and how it informs a life of faith.

Chapter 2 addresses Christology, exploring the many ways in which Christians in different times and places have understood the affirmation that Jesus saves. Here Shannon introduces the rich history of this doctrine as well as the academic discipline of systematic theology. She describes how different Christian communities have located the salvific power of Jesus in different moments within the narrative of his birth, life, death, and resurrection. Shawnthea then reflects on how such theological commitments play out in congregations. To do this, she describes two fictional but familiar churches that understand the saving work of Jesus differently. One emphasizes his life and ministry, while the other highlights the power of the resurrection. For each church, Shawnthea traces the many ways Christology can be expressed in and shaped by everything from the worship space, to the hymns sung, to the ministry to the world.

In chapter 3 Shannon describes a portion of this history and addresses some of the differences between Roman Catholic and Reformed Protestant perspectives on the doctrine of sin. She also discusses liberation theologies and the remarkable influence they have had on understandings of sin in the past decades as they have offered new ways to interpret the communal nature of human



sinfulness. Identifying some of the benefits of a sturdy doctrine of sin, Shannon argues that this doctrine can be a countercultural force against American consumerism. This is followed by a constructive argument concerning the inward focus of the doctrine of sin, offered by Shannon and Shawnthea together. The chapter concludes with a sermon in which Shawnthea uses a robust doctrine of sin to proclaim the good news.

Chapter 4 looks at ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. Here Shawnthea engages the work of theologian Karl Barth, exploring his view of the church and articulating how it helps her shape her own congregational commitments. Shannon then models the process of constructive theology, engaging the work of Peter Brook, who is not a Christian theologian but rather a theatre director. Looking at the church through the lens of Brook's analysis of theatre allows Shannon creatively to engage the tradition while reinterpreting it in a contemporary light and emphasizing the communal and embodied characteristics of Christianity.

Finally, chapter 5 addresses the topic of heaven. While up to this point the conversation has been between Shawnthea and Shannon, here it is extended outward, answering specific questions of Christian laypeople. This is an embodiment of what the entire book is intended to be—an invitation to join in the conversation. Throughout our responses, we continue to tease out of these questions what is at stake both theologically and pastorally.