

**IN THE THEOLOGIAN'S WORKSHOP
FRITZ GUY ON THE CRAFT OF THEOLOGY**

Extolling the author

Our discussion of *Thinking Theologically: Adventist Christianity and the Interpretation of Faith*¹ provides me an opportunity to offer a word of personal appreciation for the author's contributions to Adventist thought, and to Adventist thinkers. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then much of my life is an extended compliment to Fritz Guy, who has been a teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend for many years. He awakened me to the delights of theological reflection long ago in my first religion classes at La Sierra College, and I have spent most of my life shadowing his career.

Everyone who has listened to Fritz and/or read his work over the years will appreciate having these essays in permanent form. And everyone who has pondered the possibilities and challenges of an Adventist theology will welcome his careful description of the discipline and the sensitive way he applies it to our own community of faith. His book addresses issues of fundamental importance so clearly, so logically, so carefully, that no thinking person could disagree. How could anyone not think theologically, or not want to think theologically, after reading this book?

And though ostensibly a book *about* theology, rather than a book *of* theology, TT is nevertheless a good example of what Fritz says good theology should be. It is centrally biblical, authentically Adventist, and culturally sensitive. In addition, it is active, cognitive, demanding, multidirectional, derivative (from faith), personal, and communal, as well as inclusive, open-ended and logical, and even a bit risky, to mention some of the other characteristics Fritz describes.

TT is also something else that Fritz has said theology should be. It is enjoyable—if not to every reader, at least to the writer.² Just look at the table of contents and you can see that Fritz had a great time organizing and labeling items in his theological storehouse. Note the careful parallelism of the section and chapter headings. All the chapter titles begin with one of the interrogatives *what*, *why*, and *how*. The section headings all employ alliterative gerunds—explaining, exploring, examining, envisioning. You have to wonder if Fritz was inspired by the SUV models in a Ford showroom—the Explorer, the Expedition, the Excursion. At any rate, it is no wonder that Brian Gerrish, one of his former Chicago professors, once remarked to me, “Fritz has a very tidy mind.” So, though my outlining skills lag behind his, as a dutiful student, I will follow the master's example, and organize these remarks in a similar way.

Expounding the argument

Fritz's study is far too rich to summarize in a short space. It moves through a long parade of theological issues, from logical fallacies to be avoided, through presuppositional issues to be addressed, to various structures of biblical and historical theology and different ways of pursuing theological topics—synchronic, diachronic, and focused. TT 214.

But for me the last chapter of the book is the best, for several reasons, and I would encourage those who haven't yet studied the book to read it first. It clearly summarizes Fritz's conception of the theological task and illustrates it beautifully. As Fritz describes it, theological thinking must be tripolar, that is, it must include careful reflection on “the Christian gospel, our spiritual center; our cultural context, where we live, worship, witness, and serve; and our Adventist heritage, the foundation of our theological identity.” TT 225.

It is important to realize that a tripolar conception of theological thinking is not the same as a tripartite division of the theological task. The three poles are not different areas of the theological territory, or pieces of the theological puzzle—where you could technically have one or two without the other. Fritz has some-

¹ Andrews University Press, 1999. Hereinafter, abbreviated “TT.”

² “Theological thinking is also .. a kind of intellectual and spiritual play....” It is “interesting, lyrical, exuberant.” TT 51.

thing more complex than that in mind. When we think theologically about any topic, I hear him arguing, attention to the Gospel, to culture and to our denominational heritage will all play a role. They cannot be separated, because they are all dimensions, aspects or, to use his preferred word, “poles” of our religious identity.³ We cannot extract ourselves from our culture or our denominational background when we think, nor should we try. The important thing is to be aware of their influence and their proper roles, so we can maximize their appropriate contribution.

As Fritz describes the gospel, its central element is the notion that God is universal love, and this deserves a preeminent role in religious reflection. His remarks on cultural context express one of the pervasive concerns of the book, namely, that we cannot think about anything, including our faith, apart from the situation in which we find ourselves. And his suggestive account of the Adventist heritage serves as a programmatic theological essay of its own. The comments on sabbath, advent hope, the ministry of Christ, human wholeness, and especially on truth, not only engender a deep appreciation for the Adventist perspective, they provide exciting glimpses of what a full-fledged Adventist theology might look like.

Another important feature of Fritz’s proposal is the way he relates the Adventist heritage to the Christian gospel. While he affirms the importance of authentic Adventism, being Adventist is a way of being Christian, not something other than or more than being Christian. And the features which we share with Christianity in general are more fundamental, more important, than the distinctives that set us apart. TT 229, 251.

Theology as craft

One of the most helpful aspects of the discussion is Fritz’s description of theological thinking as something that all serious Christians not only should, but can, do. It is not the province of the specialist alone. Like every human endeavor, it has its superstars, figures whose ideas are widely discussed, sometimes for centuries. But these are rare exceptions. Theology, to use Fritz’s distinction, may be a profession, but theological thinking is not.⁴ It is accessible to every dedicated church member. In this respect, theology is more like a craft than an art. You don’t have to be a genius to do theology. The required skills are accessible to all. You just have to be willing to put in the time to acquire them.

Departing a bit from Fritz, I think that theological thinking is like a craft in other ways, too. It is best learned not through theory, but through practice, specifically, by repeated contact with those who know the craft well and communicate their skills effectively. And like a craft, theological thinking of the sort Fritz describes is typically done in a rather ad hoc way, by addressing concrete problems as they arise rather than constructing a theoretical edifice.

Expanding the discussion

There is so much here and it is said so well that I find it difficult to take much issue with TT. To crib a line from the theology and falsification debate, “On the ground marked out by Fritz, he seems to me to be completely victorious.” But I would like to raise some questions in the interest of promoting discussion.

The audience

I am not sure this project quite achieves Fritz’s objectives. His intended audience is the “serious general reader.” But I am not convinced that’s who will profit most from it. When people say, “I’m not writing a book for experts,” the subtext is usually, “But they *will* be by the time they finish reading this.” In spite of Fritz’s declared intentions, this is not a how-to book for the general church member. It is a manual for professionals. It is a helpful discussion for people who already have a pretty good idea of what theology involves. In fact, I think it provides an excellent description of what a good ministerial education should

³ “The three ‘poles’ of Adventist theological thinking ... are not separate from each other and do not represent separate tasks. Rather, Adventist theology is a single task—one comprehensive, integrated activity of interpreting faith, albeit with three fundamental concerns.... For the whole point of the metaphor of polarity is to insist that the concerns associated with each of the three poles should be continually recognized and addressed in our collective interpretation of faith.” TT 250-51.

⁴ “A profession is distinguished from a trade or a craft only insofar as the practice of it is informed by a proper theory” (Schubert M. Ogden, “Toward Doing Theology,” *Journal of Religion*, 75 [1995]: 13).

do—acquaint students with all the facets of theological inquiry in ways that uplift the life of the community.

I am particularly interested in the way this book might serve the needs of Adventist pastors. And I am curious that there is very little said here about the pastor's role in thinking theologically. After all, who is the person most likely to assist the church members in this area of their lives? Fritz's book shows that theology plays a pastoral role in the life of the community. But the pastor also plays a theological role, and I would like to see that aspect of ministerial service developed here.

Fritz's proposal also raises important questions about Adventist education. If thinking theologically is something everyone in the church should do, then training people to think theologically should be a high priority in the church. In this connection, we need to hear more about the distinctive role of Adventist schools, specifically our colleges and seminaries, as places where this work should be carried out. The fundamental task of Adventist education is arguably to do precisely what Fritz describes as theological thinking. That is, to encourage and equip young church members to think carefully through their beliefs, with professional assistance in light of the challenges these beliefs face in the contemporary world. I think our educators need to hear Fritz's call for thinking theologically. I also wonder what Fritz has to say about this, particularly in view of his extensive work as a college and seminary teacher and administrator.

The church as theological community

While emphasizing that every member of the church should think theologically, Fritz also describes theology as a function of the church as a whole. He speaks of "the community's theological vocation" and calls for a "community-wide discussion." TT 180, 43. And at the end of chapter 7, he remarks, "Everything I have said here about individual religious experience as an ingredient in theology has a parallel in the life of the community of faith: the shared experience of the community is a significant ingredient in its collective understanding of faith." TT 156. Okay. Now how does this work? Just how does the community as a community do its thinking? What are the organs of theological communication? What are the goals of theological interaction?

Fritz mentions the sabbath school class as one place where theological thinking takes place. Another example he cites is the process that led to a revision of the church's Statement of Fundamental Beliefs in 1980, which involved a broad cross-section of participants. If this is what corporate theological reflection involves, the process is quite complex and requires a good deal of attention. We ought to be discussing our beliefs at considerable length on various organizational levels of the church.

In this connection, Fritz speaks of theological thinking as a professionally assisted activity, and says some helpful things about the contributions that those whose "vocation is the ministry of theology" can make. TT 40-41. One of them is "to identify major theological issues" that should be "addressed by the community as a whole." But just how does the community as a whole address these issues? And how does the community as a whole make its decisions? We need to hear more from Fritz about the way in which "the community as a whole, as distinct from its organizational and institutional structures" carries on theological conversation. TT 9.

Experience as a theological resource

Fritz's discussion overall focuses predominantly on Adventist beliefs. Theological thinking is surely an intellectual enterprise and this metatheological proposal consists of thinking about how we ought to think. In this connection we have chapters on how to analyze beliefs, determine their meaning, assess their truth. But Fritz also tells us that our theology should arise from what the community of faith "experiences" and "practices," not simply what it believes (TT 38), and he identifies "personal-experiential ingredients" in theology (TT 156-57). I want to hear more about this important connection between experience and theology. How do we cull or extract theological convictions from the rich matrix of personal and communal religious experience? I am convinced that this is a more pressing theological task than analyzing explicit beliefs. I also think it is a more difficult one. A community's beliefs are only a part of its religious dynamic. They are intimately connected with other factors, and these factors deserve attention, too.

Both the title and the discussion of Fritz's book portray theology as a fundamentally intellectual activity. But it has other dimensions, and these need exploration, too, particularly if the intended audience is general church members. This would be a good place to explore the interaction between theology and worship. There are theological proposals that devote significant attention to the church's liturgical life as the place where theology is enacted.⁵ But Fritz says little about the corporate worship of church as a theological activity. He has more to say about ethical issues as a theological concern. TT 232, 248. But I would like to hear more from him in this regard as well.⁶

Theology as interpretation

The key word on the cover of Fritz's book is *interpretation*. It points to a particular configuration of the theological task, and in our current context this raises questions that cry out for discussion.

Behind this configuration lies a consistent emphasis in TT. We are willy-nilly citizens of our time, inhabitants of our cultural world, and we can no more depart this setting than we could change our address to another planet. All thought and experience takes place within a framework of inherited and largely unrecognized assumptions. And our cultural perspective is with us whenever we approach the Gospel, and whenever we attempt to communicate it to others. We cannot speak effectively about the Gospel to anyone without taking into account his/her cultural setting as well our own. As Fritz says, "Our culture is, whether we like it or not and whether we admit it or not, a significant ingredient in our interpretation of faith." TT 160. "No one can live in the contemporary world without breathing its intellectual atmosphere anymore than one can live in a place without inhaling its air." TT 236-37.

Accordingly, when we describe the task of theology, or of theological thinking, as interpretation, it implies a work of mediation. The interpreter undertakes to mediate between the faith of the ages and men and women who live in the 21st century. As Fritz puts it, "the constructive way of being theologically relevant is to take seriously the need both to understand the contemporary world of knowledge, beliefs and values, and to understand (and be true to) the gospel within this world." TT 236.

With this view of things, Fritz stands in the great tradition of theologians who see their goal as mediating between the Gospel and the contemporary world. Whether we describe the poles of theological thinking as message and situation (Paul Tillich),⁷ message and existence (Langdon Gilkey),⁸ or religion and culture (Bernard Lonergan),⁹ the essential strategy is the same. The theological thinker moves between the Gospel and the modern mind. His/her task is to render the contents of faith intelligible within our cultural context. This gives theology a bipolar configuration. As Schubert M. Ogden puts it, theological proposals must satisfy two criteria, "appropriateness and credibility." They must represent the same understanding of faith as is expressed in "normative Christian witness." They must also meet "the relevant conditions of truth universally established with human existence."¹⁰

The problem for theological thinking is the relative unintelligibility of the original and originating expressions of Christian faith. The solution is to rephrase the biblical and historical material in ways that speak to us effectively today, find familiar terms and categories that make the relatively unfamiliar more accessible.

Those undertaking this task face certain hazards. There is always the danger that the message may be lost in the translation. Paul Tillich acknowledged that exchanging the traditional language for philosophical and

⁵ See, for example, Don E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Abingdon, 1994).

⁶ See, for example, the systematic theology of James W. McClendon, which devotes volume 1 to ethics and volume 2 to doctrine (Abingdon, 1974, 1994).

⁷ "A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation. Theology moves back and forth between two poles, the eternal truth of its foundation and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received" (Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* [3 vols.; University of Chicago Press, 1951-63], 1:3).

⁸ *Message and Existence: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Seabury, 1980).

⁹ "A theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix" (*Method in Theology* [Herder and Herder, 1972], xi).

¹⁰ *On Theology* (Harper and Row, 1986), 4-5.

psychological concepts in his method of correlation runs the risk of losing the substance of the Christian message.¹¹ Similarly, Fritz acknowledges that “contextualization is not risk-free.” It carries with it the possibility of “letting the context control the content of our theology.” TT 236.

In recent decades a number of Christian thinkers have mounted a vigorous protest to this way of looking at things. They want to “reverse the trend in modern Christianity of accommodation to culture.” As they see it, the attempt at interpretation has cost Christianity its unique voice and reduced it to an echo of the world around it. Their critique goes roughly like this. Modern theology is “shaped by the Enlightenment’s demand for a ground common to all rational beings.”¹² Accordingly, God becomes a way to thematize our essential human religiosity. Christ becomes a symbol of the authentic humanity available to all of us. And the Bible loses its authoritative voice. When Fritz says that “the answers to some religious questions are logically prior to the interpretation of faith and even to the experience of faith itself,” and speaks of “a theologically neutral standpoint, outside of faith,” and “basic religious belief,” he reflects the Enlightenment mentality to which these critics object. TT 183, 195.

As they see it, the goal of theology is not to find ways to render the claims of the Gospel intelligible to the modern mind, but to bring our minds into conformity to the Gospel. In other words, the theological task is to adapt the framework of our thinking to the contents of Scripture, not the other way around. Postliberals embrace “Christianity’s unique and historical particularity,” and they propose a hermeneutic in which “the scriptural world structures the church’s cosmos and identity.” As they see it, “the biblical narrative that culminates in Jesus the Messiah is the most basic and normative story and cannot be interpreted into something else.” “Rather than translating Scripture into an external and alien frame of reference, which devalues and undermines its normative position and eventually produces an accommodation to culture, the postliberals call for an intratextual theology that finds the meaning of the Christian language within the text.”¹³

I am pressing these points, not because I have answers to them and Fritz doesn’t, but because I don’t have answers to them and I think Fritz might, and I would like to hear what they are. I am concerned about anything that would lead to a narrow biblicism of the sort to which our own history shows we are susceptible. On the other hand, I am moved by the call to be more attentive to the biblical modes of thought, to the narrative patterns of biblical expression, and the desire to make every thought captive to Christ. I am also appreciative of the way in which postmodern approaches to Christianity have moved beyond the long discussions of theological method to plumb the riches of relatively neglected themes such as forgiveness.¹⁴

I agree with my friend Dave Larson, who once said, “Nothing is more practical than a good theory.” But we need practice as well as theory. So, I urge Fritz to continue his theological work by fulfilling the practical promise that TT provides, and extending the constructive theological work outlined in his programmatic final chapter. To invoke the metaphor of my title, Thank you, Fritz, for showing us around your shop. For defending the importance of theology, describing its objectives, praising its values, appraising its challenges, summarizing its history, displaying and demonstrating the impressive array of tools at your disposal. Now, please, turn on the equipment and build us something more.

Extending the effort

Books on theological method are often symptoms of theological malaise. Whenever Christian thinkers run out of interesting things to say, they seem to spend their time spinning theories about what it means to say something interesting. They offer people the sort of thing Jeffrey Stout disparages as “seemingly endless

¹¹ *Systematic Theology*, 3:4.

¹² Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation* (InterVarsity, 1996), 11, 10.

¹³ Phillips and Okholm, 13.

¹⁴ See, for example, L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Eerdmans, 1995).

methodological foreplay.” Instead of robust expressions of religious faith, they merely give the cultured despisers of religion less and less to disbelieve.¹⁵

On the other hand, books on theological method may point to something altogether different. They may show that a church feels a fresh burst of energy. They may also indicate that the community has acquired a new level of maturity, that its members have come to realize that reflecting carefully on their faith and life can enrich their experience and enhance their witness.

I hope that Fritz’s book is an indication that Adventism has reached a point where it can confidently survey the resources at its disposal, think methodically about its task, and develop an expression of its faith and life that will do justice to the vitality of the movement—to the breadth of its vision and the depth of its convictions. In other words, I take Fritz’s book as a presage of theological renewal. Whether it serves that purpose, of course, depends not just on him but on the rest of us, too. But we can all be grateful that he marks the path so clearly.

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Appendix

THINKING THEOLOGICALLY: ADVENTIST CHRISTIANITY AND THE INTERPRETATION OF FAITH

CONTENTS

Preface

Explaining the activity

1. What theological thinking actually is

Exploring the task

2. Why everyone should think theologically
3. How theological thinking should begin
4. Why theological thinking is open-ended
5. How to think with intellectual integrity

Examining the ingredients

6. How scripture should function
7. What else is involved
8. How culture makes a difference

Envisioning the work

9. What logical presuppositions need to be identified
10. What forms theological thinking can take
11. Why tripolar thinking is essential

Conclusion

¹⁵ Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight From Authority: Religion, Morality the Quest for Autonomy* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 147.

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THE SEARCH FOR ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY

Looking back over what is rapidly becoming a “career” I find that I have had an inordinate interest in the categories of change, continuity, and identity in both (1) my private journey from agnosticism to Andraeanite perfectionism back to a modified agnosticism and finally to what I trust is a more balanced Christian-Adventist perspective and (2) my professional musings in various academic realms.

For the past ten years that interest has largely focused on topics related to the Adventist search for identity in such areas as the sociological transformation of Adventism across time (which found expression in several of the chapters of a volume with the politically incorrect title of The Fat Lady and the Kingdom), organizational identity (as treated in my forthcoming Organizing to Beat the Devil: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Church Organization), and lifestyle identity (as reflected upon in my incomplete manuscript tentatively entitled Becoming Peculiar: Studies in the Development of Seventh-day Adventist Lifestyle—peculiar, we should note, implies both precious and strange). But my primary interest in relation to change, continuity, and identity in Adventism has been in the realm of Adventist theology. It is in that area that I will focus my remarks this morning—particularly as developed in my recently released A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs and my forthcoming article entitled “Twenty-seven Fundamentals in Search of a Theology.”

The search for theological identity was abruptly forced on Millerite Adventism by the Great Disappointment of October 23, 1844. Suddenly a rather self-assured people who had expected to be in the kingdom were forced to redefine themselves and their theology. The Millerite crisis would be the first in a series of crises that formed the mainline of Seventh-day Adventist theological development. Each crisis brought with it a corresponding question related to Adventism’s theological identity.

Stage 1: What is Adventist in Adventism? (1844-1885)

The first question that those who would eventually become Seventh-day Adventists had to face was “What is Adventist in Adventism?” That question dominated the movement from 1844 up through the mid-1880s. The originators of Sabbatarian Adventist theology quite naturally focused on the central chapters of the book of Revelation as they sought meaning. By 1848 a small group of Bible students had coalesced around four key doctrines—the literal premillennial Second Advent, the opening of the second apartment of the heavenly sanctuary with its unique ministry (Rev. 11:19), the eschatological restoration of the seventh-day Sabbath (Rev. 12:17; 14:7, 12), and conditionalism. None of those doctrines, interestingly enough, were originated by anyone who became a Seventh-day Adventist. On the other hand, they were welded into what has come to be known as great controversy theology by Joseph Bates.

By 1848 Bates along with James and Ellen White believed that they had a message—the message of the third angel of Revelation 14. The “scattering time” was over and the “gathering time” had come.¹ That core group, having answered the question of “What is Adventist in Adventism?” was ready to do evangelism. They would utilize two means: publication and a series of Sabbatarian Conferences that extended from 1848 through 1850. For decades Adventist historians taught that those conferences were where they developed their theology. But nothing could be further from the truth. Ellen White makes that clear when she writes of the second conference that they had gathered a group of some 35 believers together in western New York, with “hardly two agreed.” “Each,” she noted, “was strenuous for his view, declaring that they were according to the Bible. All were anxious for an opportunity to advance their sentiments, or