



On Thinking and Reading
Tim J. R. Trumper
www.fromhisfullness.com

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Many years ago, during the 1994/1995 academic year to be exact, I had one of those “aha” moments. Perhaps it would not have turned out to be quite the moment, had it not happened amid my wrestling with the inconvenient conflict between the biblical data on the doctrine of adoption and much of what had been written on it in the history of the church. I refer to a conversation with Joachim, a fellow student, in the fifth-floor kitchen of the *Evangelisches Stift* in Tübingen: “To be a theologian,” he nonchalantly remarked, “takes as much thought as reading.”

Although the comment, heard in the abstract all these years later, is not exactly earthshaking, it changed my approach to theology, and helped me embrace the leading of the Lord in finding my voice. What is more, it helped with the discerning of the theological calling of others. Some, theologians are more readers than thinkers and, as such, find their concentration in maintaining orthodoxy in the church. Others are thinkers or processors as well as readers and are called to biblically renew the inherited theology of traditions and systems.

Of course, the distinction between readers and thinkers is somewhat generalized, and speaks of a difference of degree rather than of kind. Still, there seems to me to be something to it.

THE READERS

The readers are those with an encyclopedic knowledge of authors, book titles, and theological positions. They speak with authority of the past. They guard the heritage, sometimes tenaciously, and tend to be more prolific in publishing. That is because theirs is largely and helpfully a summarizing of historic happenings and doctrines. The strength of the reader lies in his (or her) dissemination of the findings of others. They grant longevity to the thoughts and writings of the creative minds who have gone before them, but theirs is a trade in the already accepted orthodoxy. Sometimes readers may be deemed creative in their own right,

but typically by those unacquainted with the original sources. It is, after all, generally easier for the believer to quote living theologians than dead ones. Still, their quoting of theologians at all is tribute to the success of the readers in opening up trickle-down outlets for theology from the past to the present, and trickle-out outlets from the theologians to the pews.

THE THINKERS

As for the thinkers, they are also well read, but their proverbial eggs are not all in the one basket. Perhaps Spurgeon hinted at this when he said, “Read much not many.” This type of theologian moves, ideally by the call of God, beyond reading, thinking, pondering, and contemplating, into the realm of theological integration and formulation. He (or she) advances beyond the repeating of the inherited tradition of theology (for all the good this does), to the biblical renewal of theological traditions and systems. Such theologians combine confidence in the Spirit’s ministry in the church at large, with awareness of the leading of the Spirit within. They generally tend to go unappreciated in their lifetimes, for their contributions are suspected and debated by the scholarly initially and are left undigested for the time being in popular circles. Only later does their creative orthodoxy, once vindicated by Scripture and the consensus of the orthodox, become the accepted orthodoxy and undergo restatement for the sake of digestion in the pews.

Obviously, there are dangers accompanying the callings of both the reader and the thinker: of reading with little processing and of processing with little reading. If the propagation of a historic tradition of theology is the main aim of the reader, then too much processing will be deemed a threat, a challenge to the *status quo*. If the main aim of the thinker is the destruction of a tradition of theology, then free-wheeling thought in isolation from the Scripture and the worthy findings of history will result. Where both imbalances are left unchecked, Christian theology goes to seed. Among the readers, traditionalism obscures the illuminating light of the Spirit. Among the thinkers, rationalism obscures the illuminating light of the Word.

Since the reader tends to be deemed more acceptable and safer than the thinker, at least in conservative circles, permit me to say a word in honor of the thinker. Many are the attempts to limit his influence by fears of “the



slippery slope” and “the thin end of the wedge.” Obviously, there is enough truth in these expressions to give some grounds for caution, but to shut down fresh thinking on the basis of fear is not a recipe for health in the life of the church. After all, there are cautions the reader would do well to heed. Consider, for instance, Philip Schaff’s reflections on the Greek Father Epiphanius (c. 320-403 A.D.). It reminds me of my conversation with Joachim, and counters the temptation to fear in the reader and of indiscipline in the thinker:

The learning of Epiphanius was extensive, but ill digested. He understood five languages: Hebrew, Syriac, Egyptian, Greek, and a little Latin. Jerome, who himself knew three languages, though he knew these far better than Epiphanius, called him the Five-tongued. . . . He was lacking in knowledge of the world and of men, in sound judgment, and in critical discernment. He was possessed by a boundless credulity, now almost proverbial, causing innumerable errors and contradictions in his writings. His style is entirely destitute of beauty or elegance.¹

God grant us theologians today who digest as well as read. In the balance of reading and processing—reading in the light of Scripture and processing in the light of the fear of God—lies the path to a creative orthodoxy. Without it our orthodoxy goes to seed. There has to be room for thinkers as well as readers, not least in our conservative Reformed circles.

¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 3, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2006), 928.