

RESPONSE TO PAUL GRIFFITHS’ “THEOLOGICAL DISAGREEMENT: WHAT IT IS & HOW TO DO IT”

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I am so grateful to be part of this conversation today. I would like to offer particular thanks to Susan Wood for giving me the opportunity to respond to Paul Griffiths’ thought- and emotion-provoking work. At first read, it became apparent that Griffiths’ paper revealed honest, challenging, and heartfelt reflections on the state of theology and this Society today. To be sure, there are places where he seems to do more than disagree, and in knowing his audience, is quite confrontational. In what follows, I attempt to do justice to those fighting words by making two points: the first is related to his use of the language of gift and the second is connected to what I perceive as a hegemony of cognition running throughout his paper.

Griffiths’ overall theme, as his title suggests, is what theology is and isn’t and how to disagree. For Griffiths, theologizing is not the production of doctrine. Doctrine is one thing and theology is another. Indeed doctrine is in many ways a gift for theologians. It stems from the gift of the LORD and is evident in Scripture and magisterial teachings. This brings us to my first point related to language. When describing the sense of gift, Griffiths employs traditional male metaphor and spousal imagery. Like in ecclesial documents, LORD in his work is in capital letters. I cannot help but add in my introductory comments that framing his theology in this manner in no way offers a polite or “hospitable” nod to the patriarchal and heterosexist underpinnings of such theorizing (and he takes hospitality quite seriously). I found myself bewildered as to how to approach this conversation when I would never enter into it in this way. Are we already at an impasse, at a *differend*? It is not that I wish for him to apologize, rather to recognize the power issues behind his use of this language. I am not sure what his response to this would be. I am hopeful that he will see this as disagreement and not as he says, “scold.”¹

The larger issue for me is his use of the discourse of gift, specifically how he employs the term gift with a sense of concreteness, boundedness, and certainty. This boxed, wrapped gift causes my postmodern sensibilities to bristle. I understand the allure of the language of gift—the graced nature of such an offer—the asymmetry of giving—that it cannot be repaid or sufficiently recovered. And for Griffiths, the LORD is the gift, and doctrine is an extension of that gift found in Scripture and church teachings. This gift is so special and distinct—and wrapped so perfectly—that theologians cannot influence it. That is not the role of theologians; instead we are to discover, interpret, and speculate—unwrap it. As he states, establishing church doctrine is “essentially an episcopal function. Theologians may and should teach Church doctrine by ordering it, systematizing it, writing books and essays in which it is set forth . . . But that is not the same as establishing what the Church’s doctrine is. Doing that requires an authority theologians lack: the authority to pronounce.”²

¹ Paul J. Griffiths, “Theological Disagreement: What It Is & How to Do It,” *CTSA Proceedings* 69 (2014): 23.

² *Ibid.*, 28.

In an effort to engage Griffiths' work with genuine openness and honesty, I pose the following questions. I realize that they are somewhat "unproductive and uninteresting" when read from his perspective.³ Still, they nag at me. Why does Griffiths want this model for theology? Is it that he does not trust theologians? Is it that he needs certainty? What is the problem with saying—it—theologizing—is more of a negotiation? Why is it okay or acceptable that the theologian is "safely dead" as he puts it, before, perhaps, the magisterium changes its proclamation?⁴ Think of all the life that is symbolically saved by an understanding of gift of the Lord and Christian teaching not as proclamation—but as dissent and dialogue, not in the future, but in the present moment—in the flesh.

In Genesis 18, when Abraham bargains with God not to destroy Sodom, we meet a divine other who dialogues and is open to dissent. Better yet, in Mark's story of the encounter between Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman, we find Jesus changed by the other. When this other, a foreigner, a Gentile, and a woman "beg[s] him to cast the demon out of her daughter," Jesus responds rather uncharitably, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Unmoved, she challenges Jesus to engage her otherness and need, to be hospitable: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs," and because of her poignant, corrective response, Jesus is moved—converted even—and her daughter is healed.⁵ If Jesus can change his mind by dissent and dialogue, why can't doctrine change in our lifetime in light of theological dissent and dialogue?

To be sure, genuine theological engagement with the other is complex and cannot and ought not be conceptualized as merely an intellectual affair. This brings me to my second point: the need to acknowledge that theology and theological disagreement cannot be separated from embodied, corporeal, lived experience, and as such cannot be held to hegemony of cognition. We have to be attentive to personal feeling and experience. One could say Griffiths is passionate about cognition—about as he puts it, "unadulterated thought-performance."⁶ In phrases like this one, his work explicitly privileges reason and cognition above all else. Yet, implicitly one detects in his work an unsettledness with some individuals and groups being otherized and alienated from the Society. This not an intellectual alienation only, but an affective one as well. Part of the reason some may no longer show up to this Society is that they feel unheard and are hurt and angered by that. That is an important insight that needs to be elevated and not buried under the language of cognition. Conflict is something that Griffiths values, as I do. It can lead to a sense of truth and genuineness. This truth and genuineness is only possible when affective as well as cognitive discrepancies are embraced.

This reality becomes all the more obvious when Griffiths makes a suggestion for the Society, stating: "Too many of the Society's consultations and panels and so on . . . proceed under the umbrella of a softly self-congratulatory dogmatism which doesn't permit serious disagreement and actively prevents polemical exchange."⁷ In theory, I agree. Sometimes we, meaning the Society, myself included, resort to a "group think"

³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵ Mark 7: 26–30 NRSV.

⁶ Griffiths, 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

if you will—about this or that issue or teaching. His use of “self-congratulatory,” while a bit harsh is not totally inaccurate. At the same time, it is important to not be prematurely self-congratulatory of ourselves here for pointing out and agreeing about this problem in the Society. For part of the excitement over having one’s voice heard—of having these panels, is that they and the individuals present at them have been muted, ignored, and erased in many places and many times. This is where we really need to engage the issue of power, which is a concept floating like a specter in the background of Griffiths’ paper yet never fully recognized. It is not just that these panels are self-congratulatory, but they come out of a history of being battered and bruised—disempowered to speak one’s theological voice and have a safe place in which to speak it. These affectively-charged stories cannot be dismissed.

Perhaps what is happening here in the Society is analogous to what Thomas Friedman understands in terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict when he writes: “The Jews have been standing on the subway of life for two thousand years. One day in 1948, they finally got a seat.”⁸ The fear of losing that seat and falling victim again becomes paralyzing because it is contextualized in a past trauma or an unhealed wound. Giving up one’s seat symbolizes giving up one’s security. So burdened by anxieties about our place in the church—at the table, perhaps members of this Society, like weary commuters on the subway, have become anesthetized to the needs and feelings of the others to whom Griffith’s directs our attention. In other words, when one identifies as a so-called victim, it seems unnecessary to be hospitable toward the so-called perpetrator.

We need to find a way to open up theological questions as Griffiths suggests without ignoring these emotionally charged stories and histories; therefore, before even getting into theological disagreement regarding interpretation and speculation, I propose that we begin to genuinely analyze how the roles of victims and perpetrators in this Society are cast. Who are the victims and who are the perpetrators? Then we might begin to look for some common ground between the two. Unfortunately, these character types in the current theological context have been so heavily typecast that there is very little wiggle room in the public sphere to imagine the roles as overlapping or reversible. So the work is daunting. The tenor of Griffiths’ paper calls our attention to the gravity of this problem. All I add is a humble plea that, when enacting theological disagreement, we admit that speaking about cognition—about rational content—is not enough. Sure, we need to be able to engage the other on the intellectual level, and honestly analyze the other’s ideas and evaluate their discourse. At the same time, we have to be cognizant that ideas and language are not without context, and hence we are called like Scripture shows to be vigilant about the affectively-charged stories of all those individuals and groups who are vying for a place at the table. With hard work, and an openness to conversion, hopefully we can construct a table that is big enough for all of us.

⁸ Thomas L. Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, updated with a new chapter (New York: Random House, 1995), 407.