

The Craft of Being a Writing Theologian within a Theological School

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I am speaking to you today in your capacity as theologians working within theological schools. Perhaps some of you are uncomfortable with that word *theologian*. Maybe you are thinking, “No, no—I’m a biblical scholar,” or “I’m a historian,” or “I’m an ethicist—not a theologian.” But I am using the word *theologian* as an umbrella term covering *all* of us who work at the task of preparing men and women for Christian ministry—preparing them to interpret the work of God and our traditions about God to a world in need. To the outside world, if not to the people in your institution, *you are all theologians*. So, please stop thinking that you are an imposter if you call yourself one. Your colleagues with PhDs in systematic or doctrinal theology do not get exclusive rights to the title.

In my remarks today I am going to take a slightly circuitous route. I believe that to be an effective writing theologian you have to attend to matters both of the spirit and of the flesh. What I mean is that you must have a very clear sense of what motivates you, of other paths you could have taken (and may one day yet take), and of your concrete institutional context. I will begin by considering these other matters. Then I will turn to focus more pointedly on what it takes to write for the church and how writing for the church can complement your work as a teacher and an institutional citizen at your school.

Trace the trajectory of your development as a writer

My first of four exhortations to you is that you trace the trajectory of your development as a writer. How has your sense of yourself as a writer evolved? You will need to go back to a date well before you started graduate school and identify phases of your development. The following two questions can help you to crystallize your reflections concerning each phase: First, what role did outside circumstances play in shaping your sense of yourself as a writer? Second, what was your vision of success at that time? To model the kind of reflection I am suggesting, I will briefly examine my own development as a writer, addressing the questions about outside factors and changing visions of success. I invite you to find points of comparison and contrast with your own experience.

The first phase: Aspiring creative writer.

I first started thinking that I might become a writer when I was in seventh grade. The outside influence was an English teacher named Ms. Agostin. I had a girl-crush on Ms. Agostin, in part because she praised my writing effusively. I distinctly remember her saying, “The words flow from your pen.” That year I submitted a short poem to a Scholastic Books publication called *Read* magazine. It was published, and I was euphoric. For the remainder of my junior high and high school education I wanted to be a creative writer—a novelist. My vision of success was vague, but it involved large reading publics and substantial influence—whatever was the 1970s equivalent of the Oprah Book List.

This first phase lasted until my freshman year at Duke when my creative writing professor, Dr. Judy Dearlove, sharply criticized my writing because it did not meet her avant garde preferences. I became unable to write a single sentence without doubting myself, and I abandoned my aspirations to be a novelist. In retrospect I view Dr. Dearlove as an agent of divine providence for my life. She made me begin to rethink my career plans.

The second phase: Discovery of academic research.

At the end of my sophomore year of college, at the urging of another Duke instructor, Dr. Barney Jones, I decided to become a New Testament professor. After my MDiv, when I was eventually admitted to a doctoral program, I assumed I would have to publish if I didn't want to perish, and indeed I still loved to write. But my real calling, as I perceived it, was to teach.

The outside factor that would profoundly change my self-understanding and aspirations with regard to writing was the PhD program in New Testament at Yale. Over the course of my four years in that program, I was formed in a rigorous discipline and discovered the intense intellectual pleasure and aesthetic satisfaction of engaging in the investigation, exegesis, and exposition of texts. I began to yearn to be an important academic writer. My vision of success was to be like my teacher, Wayne Meeks, an exceptionally disciplined and original thinker who writes with impressive elegance and economy of style. I remember an incident in the Day Missions Library at Yale University Divinity School. I was reading an article by Wayne, and one of my peers in the graduate program walked up and asked me what I was doing. "Engaging in silent hero worship," I answered. What would it mean to be like Wayne Meeks? It would mean teaching at a place like Yale and publishing books of powerful and widespread influence in the academic world—books with a little bit of crossover appeal, maybe something picked up by the History Book Club. I was soon on that path, teaching first at Emory and then at Yale. But there was a slight problem: my position was nontenured and therefore distinctly insecure. When the central administration started making noises about retrenchment at the divinity school, I decided to look at job openings elsewhere. I ended up, again by the hand of providence, at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

The third phase: Writing also for the church

The outside influence for the third phase was my present institution, Louisville Seminary, where I have taught since 1995. At LPTS writing for the academy is rewarded, but so are speaking and writing for the church. Many of our students are heading toward parish ministry; others are directed toward counseling careers. Most all of our students feel a strong connection to the church. Our faculty members publish extensively for both the guild and the church. I think the difference from Yale is that, at Yale, in my experience, the church could remain somewhat abstract; at LPTS we are always acutely aware of denominational particularities and requirements, whether for the PC(USA) or the various other denominations represented among our students and faculty. There have also been more specific developments that have shaped my path: In about 1999, motivated by the needs of my own young daughter, I embarked on a project with colleague Amy Plantinga Pauw to write a children's devotional book. None of the devotionals I could find already in print actually talked about the Bible, and all were filled with what Amy and I called "fakey little stories" and another colleague called "object lesson crappola." Through the process of writing the devotional, mentored by Amy, I discovered my inner theologian. At Louisville Seminary I have also had the privilege for the last ten years of directing the Grawemeyer Award in Religion, a \$100,000 prize to an outstanding work in the field. Through the process of reading and critiquing dozens of books each year,

evaluating specifically their creativity and accessibility, I learned how inaccessible and narrowly directed are most scholarly writings in theology and religious studies.

During this period of my career my vision of success was to write works that would be not only first rate academically but also comprehensible and appealing to a wider public—not popular books, but books for all those intelligent lay people who supposedly exist out there in reader-land. My secret wish was to have a book reviewed in the *New York Times*, and to have it sell a lot of copies. With the incredible boon of a fellowship from the Henry Luce III Fellows in Theology program, I began the nearly ten-year endeavor to write a book concerning ancient and modern beliefs about angels. It was published in 2008 by Yale Press as *No Ordinary Angel: Celestial Spirits and Christian Claims about Jesus*. I expected that this would be it! The big success!

The results, however, were decidedly mixed. On the plus side, it won a prize, and three of the scholars whom I most admire loved the book and told me why. I got emails from a few random people around the world who told me it changed their lives. I was invited to speak at churches, locally and further afield. But it did not get reviewed in the *New York Times*, it didn't even get reviewed in that many scholarly journals, and it certainly did not sell a lot of copies. Last I checked, its ranking on Amazon was 1,205,381. So I reevaluated my vision of success. I decided that the whole *New York Times* thing (symbolic as it was for public acclaim) was an insidiously harmful vestige from phase one of my development as a writer. I was chasing after the wrong kind of approval.

So, to summarize phases one through three: In retrospect, I can see that outside factors played a huge role in my development as a writer and in my own shifting standards of success. I exhort you, too, to take an hour or two sometime soon to reflect on your own course of development. How were your aspirations as a writer born and nurtured? What outside influences shaped your path? What was your vision of success at each stage? I suspect that many of your careers are (in a general way) like mine: they have had distinct phases, with good writing done in each phase, but with that writing serving different publics and appropriately measured by differing standards of success. That kind of evolution or change in a career is perfectly acceptable, and should not surprise you. A vocation—including the vocation of writing—is a dynamic thing, shifting in response to the concrete circumstances in which we find ourselves and to those concrete needs of the world that we discover ourselves able and eager to meet.

There is a fourth phase, a shift that has happened to me quite recently, but I am going to wait till a little later to tell you about that.

Assess your institutional context

The second of my four exhortations to you is that you assess your institutional context. Consider the bearing that the seminary or divinity school where you teach has on your writing. What kinds of writing does your institution reward? Are a certain number of monographs necessary for tenure or promotion, and do they have to be from certain types of presses? What about articles in peer-reviewed journals? What about writings in publications that have broader circulation among ministers and lay people—will they be regarded as having enough gravitas to count toward tenure? And what happens after tenure? How much freedom is there to branch out into different kinds of writing after you pass that hurdle?

In addition to asking what kinds of writing your institution rewards, you should also ask about the kinds of writing that your teaching load, administrative responsibilities, and sabbatical policies realistically allow. It is always hard, no matter where you teach, to find enough time to write, but it

is *distinctly harder* when you are teaching eight courses a year and required to attend daily chapel than when you are teaching four or five courses a year and have summers off.

How good is the fit between all of these institutional expectations on the one hand and your own interests and abilities on the other hand? Can you develop a pattern of writing that you find meaningful and sustaining while living within these parameters and meeting your various obligations, both institutional and personal?

When you were in graduate school, you no doubt envisioned a certain reality for yourself, and perhaps the reality you are now experiencing does not quite measure up. Perhaps you secretly think your status should be higher—that you should have doctoral students, world-travel opportunities, and the other perks that go with a position at a high-flying institution. I caution you to beware of the idols that you learned to worship while you were in your PhD program. Ambition is a two-edged sword. When we were searching recently for an Old Testament professor at LPTS, I myself was looking in every application for signs of ambition. I want a colleague who is motivated—even driven—to participate in scholarly discourse and to publish, as well as to teach. But at the same time, I recognize that ambition can interfere with one’s thriving as a faculty member and as a servant of the church if one measures oneself always and only against the guild’s standards of success. The guild’s standards of success are not the same as God’s standards of success. They probably are not exactly the same as your institution’s standards of success, either. Do not cater excessively to your own ambition, lest it co-opt you and make you take your eyes off the true prize: a career that doesn’t just add line after line to your CV, but one that makes a genuine difference in people’s lives.

Recognize that there are multiple callings

My third exhortation is for you to recognize that there are multiple callings and multiple ways to fulfill a single calling. Above all resist arrogance and keep Paul’s words from 1 Corinthians 4:6b–7 (NRSV) ever before you: “[Let none of you] be puffed up in favor of one against another. For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” If you have done the self-evaluation that I advocated in exhortation one, then you have already realized that you are where you are in large part because of circumstances and people completely outside your control. Be thankful for the privilege and the providence that got you where you are and resolve to pay it forward. But please do not look down on those whose career paths are different from your own or suppose (even subconsciously) that their contribution must necessarily be inferior. Respect the second-career PhDs and what my colleague Dianne Reistroffer calls the blue collar PhDs. Respect those who publish in venues other than university presses or who devote their lives to being outstanding institutional citizens, carrying, perhaps, a burden of labor far greater than the one you carry. Respect the book editors and the ATS administrators and your own institution’s administrators. Recognize that just as God’s hand has led you to your present circumstances, so it is with them.

In making this exhortation to respect those who labor among you, including those who have charge over you, I am still speaking out of my own experience and could probably be accused of special pleading, since I am myself about to enter into administration. Over the past year, as I wrestled with my own developing sense of call to be the next dean of Louisville Seminary, the biggest obstacle I had to overcome has pertained to my aspirations as a writer: how can I research and write if I am administrating? Everyone knows that being a dean is an all-consuming job. Everyone knows that deans have no time to publish. It took monumental effort to get myself past

my own perception that to decrease or even to halt my publishing would be to abandon everything I have worked for.

From this new vantage point I now see that the nonevent of my recent book also exhibits the hand of divine providence. It didn't get reviewed in the *New York Times*. It didn't sell thousands and thousands of copies. The nonoccurrence of these expected outcomes has made me realize that I have been measuring myself by inappropriate standards of worth. I needed to let go of them and craft for myself a new vision of success. I cannot tell you how I will view this incipient phase of my life ten years from now, but I can tell you that right now I am writing and editing all the time—just not things that will be published by notable presses or bring me fame. And it is all good.

My fifteen-year-old daughter was recently involved in a three-way conversation about her favorite musician, Ben Sollee. Sollee is a cellist who has turned his classical training in cello to new ends, using creative playing techniques and drawing on influences from folk, bluegrass, jazz, and R&B. My daughter's friend is a classical cellist and has nothing but disdain for Sollee, "because he plucks." A teacher overheard the girls' conversation and asked rhetorically, "What, can a musician never use an instrument in a style other than the one originally intended? Then how would there ever be anything new?" So God may intend to do something new with you. Be open to that!

Whenever you are called upon to write for your institution, as you certainly will be, please do not suppose that you are wasting your hard-won scholarly capacities. Those ATS accreditation reports, those grant proposals, those institutional publications, and even those syllabi and comments on student papers are not sidetracks or distractions from your path but as essential parts of the journey. Use them as opportunities to hone your craft, for these occasions are also part of what it takes to be a writing theologian in a theological school. This is part of why your institution pays you. You are not wasting all your fine training; you are simply repurposing it for a time, whether short or long. You are playing a different kind of music. So, let the habits of careful research and the attention to nuance and precision that you developed in graduate school serve other aims than the narrow ones you originally supposed. Marvel at your own adaptability and be glad.

Make a way to write for the church

My fourth and final exhortation is that you make a way to write for the church. I say "make" rather than "find" a way because writing for the church will not likely happen by accident; you have to make the effort. It is so much easier to stay in your academic comfort zone. In your comfort zone you can keep using the familiar language and addressing the familiar questions. You can hedge your bets with caveats and conditions and to-be-sures, and avoid the risk that comes with making a genuine faith claim. I'll address each of these issues in turn—first language, then questions, and finally faith claims.

Our prose

A fine PhD program instills a love for disciplined argument and rarified discourse that is both a blessing and a curse. It is an intrinsic blessing to be able to think critically; analyze, assemble, and weigh evidence; measure impacts; attend to detail; and observe subtle gradations of meaning. Such skills *can* also be an asset when you come to preach, write devotionally, compose Sunday School curricula, blog, or engage in any of the other kinds of writing of interest to a wider church audience—but only if you have the discipline to excise every hint of what might be taken as jargon,

didacticism, and intellectual arrogance, and the courage to live by the rule that, with respect to your prose, less is nearly always more.

My experience with directing the selection of the Grawemeyer Award winners in Religion has persuaded me that there are quite a number of Professor Pootwattles among us. Professor Pootwattle, if you do not know, is a “virtual academic” on the web. You click a button and the professor generates a syntactically correct sentence based on common phrases pulled from academic works. A few examples:

1. The logic of millennial hedonism is comparable with the hermeneutic of classification.
2. The sublimation of the unknown may be seen as the (re)invention of narrative qua narrative.
3. The de-eroticization of the master-slave dialectic does not undermine the totalization of materiality.
4. The differentiation of post-Hegelian criticism is indistinguishable from the emergence of teleological narrative.

Writing for the church requires that one expel Professor Pootwattle from the premises (and the academy would also be better off without him). I mentioned that Amy Plantinga Pauw and I wrote a devotional book for six- to twelve-year-olds. Each entry included a Scripture passage, a meditation, and a prayer in 300 words or less. Writing this book was a fabulous way to train ourselves to focus on what counts most and to say it in a way that even a literal child could understand. My writing has not been the same since. When the book came out, Amy and I often received compliments from adults who said that they used it not only for their children or grandchildren but also for themselves because it was something they could comprehend.

The questions we address

Writing for the church is not a simple matter of dumbing down what you would say to scholars. You have to rethink your driving questions from the ground up. The kinds of specialized and nuanced interrogation or historical construction that you and your disciplinary colleagues find fascinating will not cut it for a more popular audience, who will likely find such discourse to be pedantic or boring. You must ask yourself, what are the spiritual or intellectual hungers that I, with my highly specialized knowledge, can feed? Jesus said, “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?” (Matt 7:9 NRSV). What bread will *you* offer?

The challenge for us as scholars is to find ways to speak from our strengths while addressing questions of genuine import for people’s lives. I had several false starts when I was writing my angel book, until I figured out that I needed to find the questions that mattered to readers—not the questions that mattered to me as a scholar intrigued by arcane texts and obscure developments in the history of religions, but existential questions about the meaning of our living and our dying, the possibility of entering into awareness of God’s presence, and the capacity of God to heal us of our pains and of our blindness to God’s ways in the world.

I do not mean to suggest that you cannot speak of difficult topics. I have just finished editing a book by Louisville Seminary’s president, Michael Jinkins, which stresses the importance of what he calls “a thinking faith.” Jinkins laments the cult of superficiality and the disdain for nuanced thinking that has taken hold in the United States and around the globe. The complex problems facing the church and the world require complex solutions. Moreover, there are plenty of people in the church today who yearn to be taken seriously by professional thinkers like ourselves. Taking

folks seriously, however, does not mean stubbornly insisting that they develop sudden interest in and capacity to understand the topic of our latest erudite monograph or foray into critical theory. Our challenge as writers for the church is not how to dumb down the topics we already know and love but how to *move ourselves* into new realms of discourse—discourse that is complex and nuanced, but with much of the complexity hidden from view, and written in a way that is beautifully clear and compelling to intelligent people who hunger for guidance on how to live faithfully in difficult and confusing times.

How do you figure out what questions will interest people in the church? One thing you can do is find opportunities to teach in local congregations. If you think about it in the right way, teaching in churches is not a distraction from your real work; it is *central* to your real work. I taught an adult Bible study at a church in Louisville every Sunday for about four years, and this experience shaped forever the way I now think about writing for the church. My imagined audience isn't vague; it is populated with real people whose names I know and whose questions and interests are familiar to me.

In order to figure out what interests people, another thing you can do is to read widely, including especially books and periodicals outside your discipline. To be an intellectual who can make a difference in the church, to be *wise*, you need to be conversant across disciplines and in the culture. If you don't have time to read, download books or podcasts onto your smartphone and listen to them while you do the dishes or take a walk. I generally resist the implication that the ivory tower is not the real world—it is certainly a part of the real world. But most people do not live there, and if you want to write for those other people, then you need to spend some time being where they are.

Making faith claims

The kind of claims you will be called on to make depends, of course, on exactly what it is you are writing and for whom. But many people do look to us as the experts and *want* us to share our best wisdom about what God requires of us. We were not taught how to do this in graduate school. Be bold, and allow yourself to make mistakes. Read and emulate books that address the audience you want to address in a way that you find attractive and useful. Speak from your strengths, but then venture further afield. Use your best creativity to help the church and its people to be better—better at thinking about religious pluralism, for example; better at relating to people who are different; better at coping with conflicts; better at responding to needs in their own neighborhood; better at unmasking the idols that surround us and tempt us every moment. When you make faith claims, do not worry if at first you feel like an imposter. It gets easier as you practice. You are probably doping this in the classroom as you seek to inspire your students to see how training in your discipline can be an asset to their work of ministry.

In summary, I have suggested that tracing your trajectory, assessing your context, and recognizing that there are diverse calls and diverse ways to fulfill a call will help you as you seek to find your voice as a writing theologian within a theological school. Once you have resolved to do that, you will need to pay attention to your prose, discover questions that you can address and that matter to the world, and have courage to risk putting not just your academic self but your moral and spiritual self on display. These are not easy steps to take, but they may be what is required of you if you are fully to answer God's call. Make a way to write for the church!