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Connecting: a response to Sean Larsen

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I am a self-described theologian who avoids having a system. I have probably over-emphasised the non-systematic character of the way I think. There is a method to the madness called 'my work'. There, I have finally said it. I do have, as Larsen makes clear in this informative essay on my work, a method. His characterization of the 'method' as pedagogical I think very illuminating. I certainly hope he is right to suggest I try to do theology in what he characterizes as an Anselmian mode, that is, I try to do no more than make articulate the grammar of the faith of the church. My denial of having a position is my way of defeating the presumption that theology is 'thought'.

I describe Larsen's essay as 'informative', far too weak a word for such an erudite and well-argued paper, because Larsen's analysis of my work has taught me how to understand my method better than I could have done on my own. That said, I need to say I continue to worry about the description 'my method'. Method seems to suggest that I have some formal principles that I seek to apply to this or that problem. But 'my method', as Larsen suggests, is more like a habit of mind than a clear set of rules that determine what I can or cannot say.

Of course my claim that I try to do no more than to show the grammar of the faith of the church can be challenged by asking, 'Whose church? Which faith?'[1] That, of course, is an appropriate theological challenge that can only be answered by drawing on scripture and past theological attempts to answer that challenge of 'Whose church?' Of course any answer to that challenge will be controversial, which means any answer lacking charity cannot be right.

One of the most attractive aspects of Larsen's paper for me is how he avoids the assumed knock-down question to me, namely, 'Where is your church?' Accordingly, the question is not whether the church is or is not unfaithful, but why the church exists at all. Larsen's essay is his illuminating

[1] 'Work' has long been a crucial concept for how I try to understand the work of theology. In *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015) I try to provide exemplification of that claim.

account of the philosophical commitments that have informed my emphasis on the church as crucial for any consideration of the truthfulness of Christian claims.

My method works primarily by making connections.[2] I think my most extended discussion of what it means to understand theology as an ongoing exercise in making or, perhaps better put, finding connections was in the 'Introduction' to *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified*.[3] I seldom read what I have written in the past. I often forget what I have said or, even worse, even if I remember what I have said I cannot remember where I have said it. That I cannot remember what or where I have said what I have said presents a particular challenge for me because I try to avoid being repetitive. But I recently had to read *Sanctify Them in the Truth* because I was asked to write a new 'Introduction' for the republication of the book in T&T Clark's new series of selected texts from their past publications. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the book is theologically thick. That I noticed the theological character of the book may be because Nicholas Healy's suggestion that I am 'theologically thin' made me sensitive to the theological character of my work.[4] *Sanctify Them in the Truth*, for example, includes the chapter on 'Doctrine and Ethics', which I should like to think is an essay that helps us see why doctrine cannot be separated from ethics.

That everything – all beliefs, behaviours, liturgies, prayers, the list is long – is connected to everything else is not a thought peculiar to me. What may make how I call attention to the connections a bit unusual, Larsen rightly identifies, is the centrality of the relation of act and agency. I am in Larsen's debt for making clear how that central emphasis, an emphasis that might be described as an account of theology as practical reason, forces me – and 'force' is the right word – to engage such a wide range of subjects in my work. For example, I was particularly instructed by Larsen's suggestion that my worry about Christendom stems from the ways in which that reality in the social and political world tempts Christians to speak a foreign language that separates act from character.

[2] I am very good at hiding what I have written about my self-understanding of how I have tried to work. Larsen has, however, discovered a number of those essays. In particular I think my essay, 'Connecting Some of the Dots, or an Attempt to Understand Myself', is not a bad place to start. It is an appendix to my *Cross-Shattered Christ: Reclaiming the Theological Heart of Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), pp. 144–56.

[3] Stanley Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), pp. 1–15.

[4] See Nicholas Healy, *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014).

Larsen, moreover, is quite right to call attention to the centrality of language for the way I do theology.[5] To be skilful agents of practical reason requires that what we do be rightly said. This is not a point that is peculiar to theology, but as Larsen suggests it is a philosophical remark that has theological implications. Friends have told me that I may be more philosopher than theologian, but if that is true I have to acknowledge I am not that good a philosopher. But Larsen is quite right to suggest that the role of language as a challenge to living lives that are not subject to self-deception is at the heart of my critique of liberalism as a theory and practice that allegedly makes possible a peaceable social order.

If I have any qualification about Larsen's understanding of my method it does not involve what he has said about how I think, but what he has not said. As I have indicated, he is quite right about the centrality of practical reason and correlative understanding of act and agency for how I try to show theologically how the connections work.[6] What I think he does not emphasise sufficiently is my attempt to show the difference that what we believe as Christians makes for a truthful account of the ways things are. It is understandable that Larsen may have missed that aspect of my work, as I seldom approach questions of the truthfulness of Christian convictions straight on.

Yet questions regarding how what we say as Christians can be said to be true has always been at the heart of how I have tried to do theology. At the event celebrating my retirement I tried to make that emphasis in my work explicit. The lecture was titled 'Making connections: by way of a response to Wells, Herdt, and Tran'. In that response I suggested that my attempt to make articulate the grammar of theology as a form of practical reason was my way of trying to mount a response to John Wisdom's famous challenge to the meaningfulness of theological claims in his classic essay 'Gods'.[7]

That I have tried to show the difference Christian convictions make for how we understand the way things are may at least throw a different perspective on one of Larsen's suggestions about my work, that is, his characterisation of me as someone who is not that interested in metaphysics. Julian Hartt and Robert Jenson made a similar criticism some years ago. Neither Hartt nor Jenson meant my avoidance of metaphysics as a compliment. They worried

[5] See e.g. *my Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Press, 2011).

[6] In *The Work of Theology* I try to provide a more expansive account of how I understand theology as a form of practical reason.

[7] Stanley Hauerwas, 'Making Connections: By Way of a Response to Wells, Herdt, and Tran', in Charles Collier (ed.), *The Difference Christ Makes: Celebrating the Life, Work, and Friendship of Stanley Hauerwas* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), pp. 77–94.

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that attempts to avoid the metaphysical claims correlative of theological convictions result in a failure to provide a robust account of the truth of theological convictions.[8] It is true I seldom do metaphysics, so to speak, 'straight up'. But I am keenly aware that metaphysical claims are constitutive of the way I do theology.

In fact by emphasizing the centrality of contingency in my work, Larsen helpfully locates my deepest metaphysical convictions. He is quite right in stating that my being able only to begin in the middle expresses my understanding of the contingent character of our existence, but that is not just an epistemological stance. Rather it reflects my deepest conviction that all that is is contingent or, put theologically, created. I think my love of murder mysteries may reflect my fascination with contingencies because so often attempts to solve a crime require the detectives to connect clues that are not obviously connected. The contingent character of our lives, indeed of all that is, is why narrative is such an important aspect of how I do 'ethics'. But to claim that practical reason makes possible our ability, indeed the necessity, to recognise that our lives are storied is a metaphysical claim.

One is never sure how someone read earlier continues to exert an influence on how one thinks. Larsen is quite right, however, to call attention the importance of conversation partners for me. I cannot think without thinking with MacIntyre, Taylor, Murdoch, McCabe. But there is one name that needs to be mentioned for how I understand metaphysical work – R. G. Collingwood. I call attention to Collingwood because I seldom explicitly refer to him, but even though I first read him in college his work continues to inform how I think. In particular his understanding of history as well as his account of metaphysics left a lasting impression on me.[9]

Larsen may well be right that many think I seem to hold contradictory if not inconsistent positions. It may even be the case that Larsen thinks I do hold contradictory positions. My strong criticism of Protestant liberal theology seems to be the tradition with which Larsen thinks I am best identified. I think he is probably right. Yet to be so identified does not mean I am a liberal Protestant theologian, but rather that I accept the challenges to which liberal Protestantism attempted to respond.

[8] For my response to Hartt see *my Christian Existence today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in between* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), pp. 44–5.

[9] One of my books that I regret has never attracted interest is *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997). In that book I tried to develop the understanding of time and history that I should like to think is crucial for understanding the way I work.

I am certainly not in Barth's league, but I think Barth can be understood in a similar manner. That does not make Barth (or me) a liberal theologian but it does mean, as Larsen indicates, I assume that there is no other place to be than where we are. Where we are, I believe, is a time when what we believe as Christians is thought unsustainable as truthful accounts of the way things are as well as how we are to live in the light of the way things are. Protestant liberalism was an attempt to respond to that situation. I disagree with most of the strategies Protestant liberal theologians used to address questions about the status of what we believe as Christians, but they were right to think a response was needed.

I hope Larsen is right, moreover, to suggest what seem to be inconsistencies in my work in fact reflect my attempt to reframe assumed 'givens'. For example, the little essay 'Why gays (as a group) are morally superior to Christians (as a group)' is and is not an essay about people who identify as gay.[10] It is not an essay about homosexuality in the sense I am not trying to suggest how homosexuals should be morally regarded. Who am I to think I have a position that gives me the right to say how they should be regarded? They do not assume they have to make a decision about me. But the essay is about homosexuality just to the extent my thought experiment is meant to force Christians to consider the difference it would make about the inclusion of gay people in the church if we were a people who seemed so untrustworthy we were not allowed to be in the army. That is an example of the kind of reframing Larsen suggests is at the heart of my method. That 'method' comes close to driving some mad because they cannot decide if I am liberal or conservative. I have no intention of trying to calm the worries of those who cannot figure out into which box I am to be put.

I do, however, want to underline Larsen's suggestion that I have no desire to reject the Enlightenment. First and foremost I would have no idea what or how one might reject the Enlightenment. As is often pointed out there are too many different 'Enlightenments' to know what it would mean to reject 'the' Enlightenment. But to even think one could reject the Enlightenment seems to me to be equivalent to the young woman who told G. B. Shaw that she had decided to 'accept the world'. Shaw responded by observing, 'You had better'. I know of no better answer about how the Enlightenment should be approached but it is still an answer that requires constant adjustment.

I need to call attention, however, to Larsen's almost throw-away remark about Kant. He rightly observes that my fundamental difficulty with Kant is Kant's attempt to give an account of practical reason that frees moral

[10] That little essay was first published in my *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 153–5.

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judgements from contingency. That is exactly right and very important, because I think Kant represents the attempt to ground the moral life in necessity. The result is a fear of history, because it is assumed if there is no way to *ground* the moral life in something other than historic communities there is no way to avoid relativism or subjectivism. From my perspective Kant is the great Stoic of modernity.

Many of the developments often associated with the Enlightenment I regard more as a friend than enemy. The Enlightenment, after all, was necessary if the church was to regain freedom from Christendom. That result, I have tried to show, is a very good thing for the church, but it presents quite a challenge for those that want nothing to do with the church. They now face the challenge of knowing how to live in a manner that does not depend on the habits the church represented and fostered. I am thinking of matters as basic as why we should keep promises we have made. The current confused discussions surrounding marriage are an indication of the challenge of the end of Christendom.

Larsen makes so many insightful observations about my work that as much as I would like to address them all I cannot. There are a few of his remarks that I feel I must, however, not pass over. I am deeply grateful that he sees the importance of Lindbeck and Frei for how I have tried to think. Lindbeck's 'Introduction' to Robert Calhoun's, *Scripture, Creed, Theology: Lectures on the History of Christian Doctrine in the First Centuries* should be required reading for anyone that wants to understand what generous orthodoxy entails as well as why such orthodoxy values developments associated with Protestant liberalism.[11]

Larsen may be right that I am not a very good Barthian because I do not engage in the debates surrounding the more technical aspects of Barth's theology, but I should like to think I am a 'good Barthian' just to the extent I follow Barth's free and joyous way of doing theology. I do try to keep up with the best scholarly work on Barth, but I am content to leave questions concerning the status of 'election' in Barth to those who know Barth far

[11] Robert Calhoun, *Scripture, Creed, Theology: Lectures on the History of Christian Doctrine in the First Centuries*, edited with an introduction by George Lindbeck (Eugene, OR: Cascade Press, 2011) On pp. xix–xx of his 'Introduction' Lindbeck quotes Frei's wonderful *in memorium* to Calhoun in which Frei observed that Calhoun taught his students not to be afraid of the word 'dogma' by helping them see that 'orthodoxy' is the name of a broad consensus within an every growing and living tradition. Accordingly,Schleiermacher must be included in that consensus as one who helps Christians recognise they have been freed from unwarranted fears of secular thought and from a hopeless passion for ideal linguistic purity to recognise that from the beginning Christianity has been a language-shaping force.

better than I do. When it is all said and done, however, I read Barth as the great exemplification of Christian speech.

I confess I am not quite sure what to make of Larsen's suggestion that my work does not require me to be a pacifist in order to be a Christian. That is certainly the case if, as I have emphasised, to commit oneself to non-violence is a promissory note to indicate the willingness to discover the violence in which we may be implicated but fail to notice. I am, however, extremely sympathetic to his later suggestion that my pacifism as well as my anti-liberalism and anti-capitalism are an expression of my opposition to the claim that liberalism and capitalism, realities that often are grouped and celebrated under the description 'democracy', were or are inevitable. From my perspective these strategies end up denying the contingent character of our lives.

In closing I can only thank Sean Larsen not only for this paper but for also being the kind of student that makes those identified as his teachers better. I think his essay is one of the best I know of for anyone who thinks it useful to try and 'understand' me. At the very least he has gotten to the heart of what I have tried and continue to try to do. That he has understood me so well is a source of satisfaction.