Reading History with the Saints

An Examination of McClendon's "Biography as Theology"

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In his book *Biography as Theology*, James McClendon writes that: “there is no foundational truth available apart from actual life, no set of timeless premises acceptable to believers and unbelievers alike, upon which Christian theology can once and for all found its doctrines.”[1] If we follow McClendon’s assertion, then not only must we consider theology within its larger historical framework, but more emphatically, history is essential for performing a theology that confesses Christ, the Son of God that lived, breathed and walked in time. This kind of theology is what McClendon sets out to show by examining the lives of saints like Martin Luther King Jr., Dag Hammarskjold, Clarence Jordan and Charles Ives.

Of course, this rendering of biography is a particular kind of history. The purpose of my paper will be to explore McClendon’s account of history as it relates to the performance of theology. “The truth of faith” he writes, “is made good in the living of it or not at all.”[2] He follows this assertion by concluding that this is why in Christianity there have been ‘the saints,’ not merely in the original, biblical sense of all members of the Spirit-filled community (I Cor. 1:2), but in the historic sense of striking and exemplary members of that same community.

According to McClendon, these saints embody the convictions of the community, but in a new way. They share the vision of the community, but with new scope or power. The example of these lives may serve to disclose and perhaps to correct or enlarge the community’s moral vision. At the same time, exemplars may serve also to stir up other convictions of the community- its understanding of God, its doctrine of human nature, its appreciation of the earth and all that is in it. Such lives, by their very attractiveness or

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[1] James McClendon. *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today’s Theology.* Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990, p. viii.
[2] McClendon, viii.

beauty, may serve as data for a Christian thinker, enabling her more truly to reflect upon the tension between what is and what ought to be believed and lived by all. To engage in such reflection is the proper task of Christian theology.

The question may arise: How do we avoid doing violence to the saints with our "use" of them? Indeed this has oft been a concern of historians regarding theological appropriations of the past. In my paper I will pay particular attention to this question, and attempt to give a response by extending McClendon's account of biography through an examination of the implications of Christ's death and resurrection for the church's readings of the lives of the saints. I will focus on the risen Christ, because I believe that Christ's resurrection constitutes the way we "read" the saints. Because the church is constituted by its saints, both living and dead, we can view history as being dialogical in nature. We are in constant engagement with those exemplars of the faith whom help us remember, who compel us into being the living witness, testifying that Jesus Christ is Lord. Therefore, understood theologically, biography could then be articulated as the opening of the saint's life into discourse or communion.

To say that history is dialogical in nature will have historiographical implications. The community of believers is called to look at the lives of saints and graft their lives, their witness onto their very own. This means that in the theological task of reading history, there is criterion at stake; it means that history can and should be read critically looking for the evidences, the hopes of lived faithfulness. This may involve a continual rereading and reworking of the lives of the saints.

McClendon's "Biography as Theology"[3]

Biography undertaken in Christian community can be a mode of communal self-scrutiny, the means by which the community may discover what God has been doing in its midst. It is a means by which theology can turn to the political. Indeed, "the content of Christian faith, or for that matter any faith that must be lived out, not just thought out, is best expressed in the shared lives of its believers; without such lives, that faith is dead. These lives in their integrity and compelling power do not just illustrate, but test and verify (or by their absence or failure falsify) the set of religious convictions that they embody."[4]

For McClendon, we read the lives of the saints, because they can show us the boundaries of the theology we confess- that which is "in the living or not at all." Living is a necessary condition of the justification of Christian belief. There is no foundational truth available apart from actual life, no set of timeless premises acceptable to believers and unbelievers alike, upon which Christian theology can once and for all found its doctrines.[5] Narrated within the Christian community, the biographies of the saints extend from the Biblical stories of Jewish healers and ancient nomads. Grafted onto these roots, the stories of the saints will carry not only a different beginning point than the biographies of the world, they will carry a different plot, and have a different telos. For Christians, there exists a perpetual struggle to lay claim to the narratives for the church, to not allow the world's narrative to distort the "counter, original, spare, strange" starting

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[3] McClendon refers to "biography as theology" throughout the corpus of his work. As my examination of his account is not limited to the book of that title, I chose to not italicize the phrase, but rather encapsulate it in quotations.

[4] James McClendon. *Systematic Theology: Ethics*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986. P. 110-11.

[5] McClendon. *Biography as Theology*. Viii.

point in Abraham and Jesus.[6] "Theology," McClendon writes in the first sentence of his three-volume *Systematics*, "means struggle. It may begin as Bonhoeffer said in silence, but when the silence is broken, a battle begins."[7] With these opening words, McClendon creates a dichotomy between church and world- one that is agonistic, and one that cuts straight down the heart.[8] Truth is not available without hard struggle because the church is not the world, and to concede to the world's narrative is to abandon the truth that rises from the Biblical narrative. To conceal the difference between the church and the world is to betray the church.[9] It is as if we exist in a "tournament of narratives."[10]

From this necessary tension between church and world, McClendon cultivates his account of conviction. Convictions are not mere proposition to be catalogued like truth-functions in a computer. Convictions can only be known through their being lived out. More, it is only through their being lived out that convictions such as Christian beliefs can be critically examined. This is why biography becomes essential for theology. If by attending to lived lives we can find ways of reforming our theology in ways that are more

[6] McClendon, *Ethics*. P.17.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid, 18.

[10] Ibid, 143. [10] This is a different relationship between church and world than what John Howard Yoder envisions in his articulation of the distinction between the two. I include here a brief articulation of Yoder's view to set more clearly what is at stake in McClendon's account of church and world. Yoder writes in *Priestly Kingdom* that "there is no 'public' that is not just another particular province… To say that all communities of moral insight are provincial, that there exists no non-provincial general community with clear language, and that therefore we must converse at every border, is in actuality a more optimistic and more fruitful affirmation of the marketplace of ideas than to project a hypothetically general insight which we feel reassured to resort to, when our own particularity embarrasses us… The alternative construction of history is celebrated by telling the stories of Abraham (and Sarah and Isaac and Ishmael), of Mary and Joseph and Jesus and Mary of Cross and Resurrection…of George Fox and his Friends. How pointedly, and at what points, this celebrated construction will set us at odds with our neighbors, will of course depend on the neighbors." From Yoder's *Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). P. 41ff.

faithful to the ancient vision of the Gospel, then our examination of these lived lives will be justified. As opposed to opinions, which we quickly acquire and shed with no commitment, convictions are less readily expressed but more tenaciously held. "It may take a long time to discover my own convictions," McClendon writes, "but when I do, I have discovered…myself. They are the gutsy beliefs that I live out- or in failing to live them out, I betray myself."[11] Convictions help shape our identity. Because of this, differences in conviction may be ultimate differences. To change a conviction is to significantly change a person or a community from what she or it was before. While convictions may serve as a kind of identity-forming grounding, this does not mean that convictions cannot be changed. They can. McClendon acknowledges that one's most cherished and tenaciously held convictions might be false and are in principle always subject to rejection, reformulation, improvement, or reformation. The consolation of this rather unstable grounding is that happily, it applies to our adversaries as well![12]

Baptists, McClendon believes, are uniquely positioned for engaging in this kind of theological task because of their particular ecclesiological structure. Unfortunately, in all their variety and disunity "Baptists failed to see in their own heritage, their own way of using Scripture, their own communal practices and patterns, their own guiding vision, a resource for theology."[13] McClendon's account of ecclesial community is closely connected to the role that conviction plays in the formation of personhood. The church is understood not as privileged access to God or to sacred status, "but as sharing together in

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[11] McClendon, *Ethics.* P. 22.
[12] Ibid, 45-6.
[13] McClendon, *Ethics*. P. 26.

a storied life of obedient service to and with Christ. (Signified by the Lord's supper)."[14] The ecclesial community is historically embedded. Its understanding of time moves in both directions. The present Christian community is both the primitive community and the eschatological community. In other words, the church now is the primitive church and the church on the day of judgment is the church now. [15] This assertion is not the denial of the facts of history, nor a rejection of their significance; rather "It is a claim for the historic significance of this present time in the life of the church and therefore by implication of every other present time in her life."[16] Christian presence "lays claim upon us exactly because it fulfills elements of our bodily selfhood: our existence as creatures bound to our environment, needing the support of our fellows, involved in a psychic structure that cries out for realization in such a way as *this*."[17] Theology then could be understood as "the discovery, understanding, and transformation of the convictions of a convictional community, including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another and to *whatever else there is.*"[18] In "discovery" and "understanding" the definition points to what theologians do with what is handed on to them, but in "transformation" it points to what is necessarily creative in their task. Theology is both a descriptive discipline and a normative one."[19]

McClendon's embodied theology provides an important corrective against Gnostic leanings that have riddled the church since her earliest days. Indeed, one way to give account to the debates culminating in Nicaea, Constantinople and Chalcedon is the

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[14] Ibid, 28.
[15] Ibid, 31.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid, 109.
[18] Ibid, 23.
[19] Ibid.

unfolding story of how the church attempted to account for the universal significance of the particular, historical man, Jesus. God's work in the world, through Jesus, is necessarily particular and contingent, not outside of the world, but in it. When Gnosticism devalued the human body, it also made Jesus' human body potentially understood (dangerously) as a barrier to the eternal truths of God, or as that which must be overcome to be enlightened. Embarrassment of the body, or attempts to protect the transcendence of God from history and the body continue to this day to circulate. It is this temptation that McClendon is attempting to resist when he writes:

> Unless theology can hear her own witnesses, unless she can take death in deadly earnest, take its grim enmity into her counsels and be shaped thereby, she ceases to be a serious discipline. Men cry peace when there is no peace, they savor peace without sacrifice, at-one-ment without atonement, unity without costly death. Theology must hear her witnesses, discover her own truth, shape her doctrine in faithfulness to that truth…. I mean that in the community that includes the doctrine of at-one-ment in its storehouses of treasures, the community whose sacred images included the Suffering Servant, there can be no clear though that does not think truly, and passionately, about that somber treasure.[20]

Some Concerns Regarding McClendon's "Biography as Theology"

In stating my concerns regarding McClendon's account of biography as theology, I think it is important to first state that I consider my concerns as "in-house" challenges and critiques. Indeed, it is because I resonate so deeply with McClendon's account of biography as theology that I feel I must explore some tensions I see in his work. My concerns stem from what I see as a propensity in McClendon's work to make words like "world" and "community" and even "saint" into philosophical/theological abstractions. When the line between church and world is formed "straight down the heart", so to speak, there is, I believe, a danger that we may be missing some crucial truths of what it

[20] Ibid, 84.

means to be the church embedded in time, witnessing to the death and resurrection of Christ. *Is* McClendon's account of a dichotomy between world/church really the way things are? *Must*, given the inherent temptations, the relationship between the two be one that is necessarily agonistic?

I want to argue that we cannot know what kind of relationship it is that we have with our neighbors. It may be adversarial, but that depends both on the nature of the church community and her neighbors.[21] To presume any other knowledge is to negate the very particularity McClendon is suggesting is necessary for theology to be performed. The agonistic nature of the dichotomy of church and world assumes too easily both where the lines are drawn and the nature of the relationship between the two. It is as if McClendon needs to construct an enemy against which the community can defend itself. What would happen if ambiguities between the two were allowed and the threat to the community lessened? How would this affect the internal cohesion of the community? If our cohesiveness as a community were also lessoned, what would be the nature of our relationship to the world?

The impetus for this paper stems back to my years as a minister in Virginia. For six years I ran a Wednesday evening children's program we called Kingdom Kids. The work was a good challenge. Our children didn't come from a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds, they came from two: the very privileged, and kids in subsidized housing. This group, which was really two groups, went to the same small school together (but rode different buses), attended the same church (but only one group's parents came), and their neighborhoods even branched off the same road. The

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[21] Again, following Yoder's quote. See footnote 10.

kids on the top of the hill lived in a luxury neighborhood with basketball courts and swimming pool. The kids at the bottom of the hill had a field, with barbed wired fencing and a rusted playground. Both groups of children were aware of the disparity.

Gathering together a group of extraordinarily dedicated church-members, we began creating materials that would immerse the kids in discipleship in a way that they could engage the stories of Scripture and the church while engaging with their own particular relationships, with the accompanying challenges the relationships held. During this time, I was also reading McClendon's *Biography as Theology,* with its account of competing narratives. This triggered my imagination to create a year-long study of "alternative" narratives of what it would mean to be a "hero" of the church. We came up with the idea of exploring the lives of various saints with the kids over the course of the year, weaving a thread of narrative throughout. We called the saints "the heroes of the Kingdom" and we started the year with a Super Hero night. We dressed up in superhero costumes. We had the kids talk about who their favorite super heroes were and why. Then, we started to tell them that we were going to be learning about the heroes of the church, and that these kinds of heroes looked a lot different than the kinds of superheroes the kids saw on TV. Over the course of the year, we learned about people like Queen Esther, Peter the Disciple, Clarence Jordan and Lottie Moon. We learned that even kids could be heroes, like little Ruby Bridges, who prayed for those who cursed her when she went to the newly integrated elementary school in her town. We also learned the story of Martin Luther King Jr.

The local university in our town had a strong theology program, and also housed a large collection of King's private letters. The professor who oversaw those letters got

wind of our project and sent some of his young graduate students to come and help us plan and create the narrative we wanted to share with the children. We spent several weeks putting together our narrative of the life of King for the children. We decided that we would transform rooms of the church basement into different rooms of King's life. The children walked through the rooms of King's life, a walk which finally culminated in a room covered with life-sized pictures of the crowds at the Washington Monument the day King gave his "I have a dream" speech. We saw the crowds, and then we heard them, as recordings of the gospel hymns from that day were played. Soon, we couldn't help but join in with the singing crowds. The children sang, holding hands, "We shall be redeemed. We shall be redeemed." Then, on a large screen, so that he was life sized on the wall, we showed a portion of the "I have a dream speech" to the children. King's words penetrated the church basement's walls. Each word, filled with hope, breaking into our world. A vision of how things could be.

When the story was finished, we gathered the children together, and we asked them what they thought. Several of them remarked that they had been studying King in school over the last few days. But they didn't know that King went to church, or that he had been a pastor. They didn't know he was a Christian. One child remarked that he had never heard King's voice before. It was a nice voice. He liked it a lot. One child, holding the hand of his friend, said, "At school, we aren't supposed to be friends with each other. But we are Kingdom Kids. We know we can be friends."

From this experience, I found myself profoundly aware of the reality of the "competing tournament of narratives." The children, who had been studying King in elementary school, felt as if they were meeting him for the first time. The King they

received in school had been sanitized of his religious roots, the rich biblical imagery of his speeches glossed over, or ignored. The children had no idea that King had ever been a pastor. They were deeply struck by the reality that his truth-telling came out of his life in the church. In that sense, we were deeply pleased to provide a narrative of King's witness that thickened the children's understanding of the church community. At the back of my mind however, I could not help but wonder- did we overplay King's attachment to the church? Was the nature of his participation in the church anything like the portrayal we provided? How could I know?

Even deeper, I was struck by the real (political) affect the story of King had on the children. The neighborhood communities were still disparate. The systems still broken, the church still unfaithful, anger still pervaded. But it is worth mentioning that a few weeks after our night with King, I received a phone call from the school principal. After introducing herself, she wanted to ask me what we were doing with the children on Wednesday nights. She said whatever it was, it was seeping into the life of the school. She told me how much the children loved their church, talked about their life in the church, and that the teachers saw a change in the classroom environment, a change they attributed to the children attending our church. From this conversation we began to think and talk about ways we could partner together, in our love for the children in these two neighborhoods. How could we, the church, stemming from our confession of Christ, partner with a school that was wary of such confessions? Eventually, we created together a tutoring program, hosted and led by our church. The partnership was praised. We went to city council meetings to have our pictures made. But all this attention did not change the dynamics of the adult community. Indeed, in some (quiet) corners, there was obvious

discomfort of the presence of this loud, chaotic group of children in the church. In light of this, the question haunted me: why were we asking the children to live politically in a way that we as parents either refused or were unwilling to do? The vision we held out for the children- was this really a sustainable form of life?

Where were the lines of community here? Was it the community of children, who heard and entered the narrative of King's life, and whose lives were changed in marked ways that were identified by those outside the community? Was the community the group who was committed to the children- the principal, the teachers, the church volunteers? Or was the community the church that housed the program? If so, how do we account for the cold rejection of these children by some of the adult members of the community? Was the rejection stemming from latent teachings of other Christian communities-the communities in the deep south who theologized justifications for slavery and segregation? Or, was it merely that the children were messy pea eaters, who made for more work at the end of an already too-long day? Where were these lines that exist "straight down the heart?"

Some Constructive Thoughts: Reading Cavell

How do we prevent words like 'community' or 'saint' from becoming philosophical abstractions? And what, after all, does this have to do with the church's reading of history? In search of answers to these questions, I now want to turn to the work of philosopher Stanley Cavell. Though not a Christian, in many regards Cavell is a compatible conversation partner with McClendon. Both Cavell and McClendon are readers of Wittgenstein. Both are interested in questions of the embodied nature of knowing, and the relationship between what we mean and what we say. Like McClendon,

Cavell hopes to show in his reading of Wittgenstein an argument for practice over an assent to a set of propositions. His work in philosophy challenges many basic assumptions of modern epistemology. While any sufficient account of Cavell's work would necessarily be entangling and dense, I hope to focus specifically on what Cavell defines as "acknowledgement" as a helpful means to consider the ways in which the church reads the lives of her saints. What Cavell does with clarity is expose many of the ways that we seek safety in philosophical constructs, that we can use, in turn to deflect our responsibility to practice as Christians our confession that Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life." I think that Cavell's account of acknowledgement will support McClendon's repeated claim that the "truth is in the living or not at all" in ways that are perhaps even more consistent than what McClendon offers.

Cavell and Acknowledgement:

Acknowledgement, for Cavell, "goes beyond knowledge, not in the order, or as a feat, of cognitions, but in the call upon me to express the knowledge at its core, to recognize what I know, to do something in the light of it, apart from which this knowledge remains without expression, or even perhaps without possession."[22] This embodied way of knowing is more along the lines of confession than it is of knowledge in its demand that we be attentive to our response to that which is to be known. There is a kind of exchange, an interplay that is not entirely one-sided.[23] Significantly, in acknowledgement, our self-knowledge is inextricably bound up with knowledge of others.

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[22] Stanley Cavell. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. P. 428.
[23] Cavell 356.

I may know who you are, and in my "knowing" of you, I may avoid looking at you when we pass on the street. Now you, the other, remains unacknowledged, or denied. I have shut my eyes to you, and this is now part of your knowledge. If I then turn and (finally) acknowledge you would be for you to know that I initially denied you. If, on the other hand, I were to continue to deny you, to act as if I did not know you, though we both know that I do, would be to deny my denial of you. Either way, I implicate myself in your existence. By avoiding you, I am "confessing" or "acknowledging" my assessment of you. Here, we see that acknowledgement demands more than just a recognition of the other. Acknowledging someone as employer, teacher, parent, or Creator just is acknowledging oneself as employee, student, child, creature- as having an identity inextricably tangled up with others. It is only from others that I learn who I am. Which means I do not know, not on my own, and the knowledge I receive from others is never final, never complete. Part of me remains strange, in process; I am other to myself.[24] Acknowledgement can be terrifying. We can be read by the wrong people, with the wrong agenda. We can be misread by mistake, or we can be misread by others who refuse to implicate themselves in their relation to us; others who refuse to see us. It is to be expected that we will avoid the best case of acknowledgement, in order to avoid the worst. Usually our fear of loneliness and rejection is greater than our hope of communion with others. What is the nature of this avoidance? For Cavell, the answer to this question helps answer the question of the nature of the way we know others.

As Cavell sees things, our tendency, one that is simply a product of the world in which we live, is to seek safety in the constructs skepticism provides. In skepticism,

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[24] Peter Dula. *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. 144. I am deeply indebted to Dula's reading of Cavell for this portion of my paper.

everyday knowledge as a whole, or common sense, is intellectually confined. That is, skepticism assumes that there is a reality that is there just out of our reach. Skepticism presses the aim of reason itself, it wants to penetrate reality itself. It throws us back upon ourselves, to assess ourselves as knowers. The skeptic insinuates that there are possibilities to which the claim of certainty shuts its eye; or: whose eyes the claims of certainty shuts. This is the voice, or an imitation of a voice, of intellectual conscience. In contrast to this intellectual conscience, Cavell turns to Wittgenstein who instead proposes a picture of human finitude. For Cavell, to understand the ways in which we "know" others, our real need is for an account of this finitude. By getting to finitude, we can better understand what finitude invites in contrast to itself.[25]

Finitude and Knowing

Cavell writes: "I should think a sensible axiom of the knowledge of persons would be this: that one can see others only to the extent that one can take oneself as an other."[26] The problem according to Cavell is that we assume that finitude is simply an intellectual lack, as if finitude were some sort of impenetrable boundary that cannot be crossed. Here is a line (imaginary or constructed) that either binds us in ways we need not be bound, or a line that we attempt to cross, that does not exist for the crossing. The sense of an uncrossable line all too often serves as a refusal to acknowledge. As long as a sense of limit can be maintained, our finitude can be reduced to intellectual lack, and we can be released from the task of acknowledging the other.

If finitude is *not* intellectual lack, what is it? For Cavell, "the truth here is that we are separate, but not necessarily separated (by something); that we are, each of us bodies,

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[25] Cavell 431.
[26] Ibid. 459.

i.e. embodied; each of us is this one and not that, each here and not there, each now and not then. If something separates us, comes between us, that can only be a particular aspect or stance of the mind itself, a particular way in which we relate, or are related (by birth, by law, by force, in love) to one another- our positions, our attitudes, with reference to one another. Call this our history. It is our present."[27] Our embodiment- all of it- our timeliness, our location geographically, our place in time are all limitations, but they are not limitations in the sense that they mark off some inaccessible beyond. It is simply, only that we are embodied. There is nothing else we might be. Our finitude does not absolve us from our responsibility for our separateness. The very nature of our separateness is up to us, and our forms of life. The way in which we love, the laws that we follow, where we are born- all these play in to the way in which we relate to one another. If there are limits in our relating, they are ones that we have set. Being mindful of our finitude involves a kind of patience. It is a demand for relinquishing final authority over oneself; allowing oneself to be seen (and so relinquishing the desire to hide); granting authority to what is seen; letting the perceptions of others become part of one's self-perception.

Cavell's account of the finite individual can thicken McClendon's account of community. Acknowledgement/confession can lead us out of self-enclosure into communion, but, terrifyingly, when communion fails, it can lead us from self-enclosure to rejection and loneliness. For community to exist, the individual must participate, be fully present. Without this individual, negotiating all the temptations of boundaries that could release one from the responsibility of being communal, the account of community

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[27] Ibid. 369.

becomes an abstraction, the space with a relegated response for which I (personally) do not have to answer. The "priesthood of all believers" does not mean that I can say whatever I choose, and deem my private opinion as more powerful than yours. Rather, it suggests the importance of a form of life (friendship, accountability, forgiveness, reconciliation) by which we are all responsible bodily for what we confess to be true.

In his book *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology*, Peter Dula offers a scriptural reference that may literally flesh out what Cavell is saying regarding our quest to know, and the boundaries we conceive that prohibit us from knowing.[28] In the fourteenth chapter of John's Gospel, Thomas turns to Jesus and says, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus responds, "If you know me, you will know my Father." Phillip joins in the conversation at this point, and asks, "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied." Jesus responds sharply, "Have I been with you all this time, Phillip and you still do not know me? Whosoever has seen me has seen the Father."

As Dula observes, the problem in this passage is not a question of knowing the Father through Jesus, as if the Father were behind Jesus. The problem is knowing this particular person with whom the disciples lived and worked, walked, and ate for an entire year. Here, there is nothing strange, at least nothing uniquely strange, about knowing Jesus. Knowing Jesus is the substance of the disciples lives together. Jesus is not saying here, "You have succeeded in knowing me, but you need to take a further step or perform some further act of cognition to know the Father also." He is saying, "You do not know me." In saying this, he is not saying that the disciples have failed to acquire a piece of

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[28] Dula,176.

information. Rather, a claim is being made about the nature of knowing. "I am the way, the truth and the life."[29] Christ himself, in his lived life, shows us how we may know. This knowing only comes in the living of this form of life.

The world is not a barrier between us and God. Our inability to know God is not from our intellectual lack, a lack that could somehow, with the proper cognitive abilities be overcome, nor is it a lack to be resigned to. Rather, our lack of knowing is our embodied failure (rejection) to enact what God bodily revealed us- those acts such as forgiveness and reconciliation. Our lack of knowing God is due to sin. Dula goes on to write: "Christianity relieves us of responsibility. But it is supposed to nail us to it. Christianity appeals to God for a complete and final solution. But Christ meant that what is needed is at hand, or nowhere. Christianity seeks to hold too much safe. Yet Christ did not. Christianity teaches us to deny our finitude. But Christ shows us how to accept it."[30]

Confessing our History

It is precisely this challenge to accept and acknowledge our finitude that must be at play in our reading of history. It cannot be a utilitarian use of history, a reading that permits us to abstractly glean concepts. Rather, our reading is to be embodied, I must be present in the reading, I must acknowledge the one whose life I am reading, and response is asked. By reading lives, not concepts, we are confessing our own finitude, as we confess the finite nature of a lived life. When we confess this as the boundaries of our theology, rather than the distance of time, we are locating ourselves within the communion of saints, whose forms of lives we seek to follow. Our reading of biography

[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid. 163.

as theology is then the seeking of these forms of life- but in our reading of these lives, our lives, our understanding of our own selves, must come in to play.

The power of the biography is not simply its exemplary nature, but also, its ordinariness. "The philosophical dimension of autobiography is that the human is representative, say, imitative, that each life is exemplary of all, a parable of each; that is humanity's commonness, which is internal to its endless denials of commonness."[31] We read lives in a two-fold manner: mindful that lives are both representative and finite. First, we see lives as representative of our own life. Here, the exemplar saints can challenge us toward faithfulness. However, in the communion of saints, parts of Christ's body, the saints are all who precede us in the church. All lives, however ordinary, can be representative as they represent the human condition as such. Here there is an incredible conceit to suggest that a life can speak for us, about us. At the same time, there is mutually a humility that occurs- by appealing to the "ordinariness" of life, and the ordinary language that accompanies that life, our task in theology is to recognize that we are held finite by its finitude. While we may see a life as representative, by examining its finitude, for example, through an account of pain or death, we become more aware of our own limitedness. Our limitedness may in turn, point to that which is beyond our finitude. By acknowledging our own finitude, we are better postured to confess our Creator.

In his *Confessions,* Augustine demonstrates the way in which his finitude points to and transcends infinitude when he confesses "But Thou, O Lord, was more within me than my inmost being, and higher than what is highest in me." (3:6). For Augustine, the self, along with the rest of creation, is a text that speaks the praise and glory of God.

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[31] Cavell, 11.

Therefore, the self, like all of creation, is not a "closed" text. Rather, the self, like creation, is communal and in communion. "In Jesus of Nazareth there is the communality of human beings and creation in their particularities and according to their logical cores- that is, according to who they are as creature- in relation to the Creator, who ever exceeds them."[32] This confession may thicken our understanding of what it means to say that theology is in the living or not at all.

This form of knowing, like McClendon's account of the task of the theologian is both proscriptive and descriptive, but more, it is also receptive. Like Augustine's confession of his created finitude in light of the infinite Creator, acknowledgement insists that we be open to the world in the hope of knowing God's good created order. Over McClendon's agonistic account, perhaps a more robust account of our engagement with the world would be something like Paul Griffiths' account of "knowing" in the world:

> You, as knower, gain from the creature known a property you could not have had without the known's being what it is which is not merely your delightedly reflexive intimacy with it, but also your awareness of yourself as delightedly intimate in just that way. Your knowledge of any creature is therefore a kind of participation in it, as its being known by you a participation of it in you. In both cases, the participation in question is derived from the more fundamental participation present in the order of being- participation in God, that is-shared by the knower and the known. And finally, your acts of knowing are in a limited sense creative acts. They make actual a good that without them was only a potential: the dual good of your knowing something you can know, and of something's being known as it is by one who can so know it. Both goods make richer and deeper the ordered harmony that is the cosmos, healing the damage of ignorance and spreading the light of knowledge. In this, human acts of

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[32] J. Kameron Carter. *Race: A Theological Account.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. P. 261. J. Carter's important book on race demonstrates this kind of reading of the lives of the saints. By engaging in the lives of saints as diverse as Maximus the Confessor to Jarena Lee, Carter brings together historical saints in an important conversation about the contemporary implications of the construct of race. Carter's book raised the question in my mind as to the boundaries and limits of reading the lives of saints for theological discourse.

> knowing bear the vestigal trace of God's knowing act of *creatio ex nihilo*.[33]

Because we are equally finite and ever open, we can understand biography as dialogical. There can be successive attempts to create narrative. Some of them may be reworked successively, over time. There may be multiple narratives happening simultaneously, some agonistic against others, but not *necessarily* so. The multiple attempts to make sense, make narrative of a life lived may speak to one another, may "cross-pollinate" other accounts. The time of the narrative, and thus the time of the self which engages in the narrative, is not restricted by *chronos* or chronology. [34] If we get the narrative wrong, we may need to try again. As Cavell writes, "Perhaps the idea of a new historical period is an idea of a generation whose natural reactions- not merely whose ideas or mores- diverge from the old; it is the idea of a new (human) nature. And different historical periods may exist side by side, over long stretches, and within one human breast."[35]

Our reading of the lives of saints is not merely a teaching tool (though the saints may certainly teach us), but rather a confession of our being bound together through time, a way of holding one another, in our finitude, in ecclesial community. In reading the saints, we must bring our whole selves to the life of the saint. Confessing our finitude, opening ourselves to their stories only to the extent that we are willing to be known in our sinfulness by them. This should shed light on the way that we understand the church- the group of people that is bound together across time. One of our challenges as the church is to read the lives of saints through the mode of acknowledgement. The dialogical give

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[33] Paul Griffiths. *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009. P. 131-32.
[34] Ibid, 258.
[35] Cavell, 121.

and take that occurs may be one demonstration of confessing our belief in the communion of saints, which in itself is a confession of the death and resurrection of Christ. What acknowledgement asks of us is that we be pinned to the responsibility of living and dying as Christ lived.