

Michael Jinkins, *Invitation to Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), chapter 3.

“I Trust in God”: Believing Christian Belief

Jinkins claims that “theology is the study of our faith statements” (63). What a rich sentence! This chapter focuses on the first phrase of the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in God.” This little phrase reveals the *form* of Christian faith, its *content*, and its *function* in our lives.

Is the form of Christian faith subjective or objective? The answer is yes (cf. 61)! Christianity doesn’t just float “out there” as a set of ideas we had nothing to do with. Christians developed it. Faith is radically subjective: *I* (better, *we*) believe. Yet faith is also radically objective: We believe not just in ideas of our own making that our imaginations control, but in *God*, in one who creates in us convictions we can only describe as *revealed* – revealed in Jesus, the Word of God, through the Holy Spirit’s work in the Church and the world. This is the objectivity of Christian faith, its content.

What we do in response to this God is *believe*. Believing in God is not just thinking through “reason” that God exists or even deciding through “faith” that God exists. Belief is better translated “trust.” The Apostles’ Creed is a *commitment*. It proclaims that God is my maker, my Lord, my savior, my sanctifier, my hope, *my life*; and not just mine, but everyone’s. To believe is to stake everything here – to sell all we have, purchase this one field, and make its treasure ours.

(Some food for further thought: Kierkegaard’s insight shows that a world that equates objectivity with fact or absolutism and subjectivity with opinion or relativism will never really understand what Christians are doing. There is no room for trust in our modern dichotomies of fact and value, truth and opinion, reason and faith. That means authentic Christian faith has to overturn those dichotomies. For further reading here, see Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* or *Proper Confidence*.)

Q: So the format of a textbook, not just its “content,” needs to respect the character of its subject? What if it doesn’t? What if it can’t?

The Messy Method of Christian Theology

How does Christian faith function? Jinkins describes a “hermeneutical circle”: Events in our lives surprise or shock us, creating needs for new understanding. To meet these needs we go back to the Church’s memories of God, and above all to its canonical Scriptures. There the Word of God speaks and changes us (64-65). The new life we live in response answers or overturns our old questions and gives us new questions. This returns us to the same point in the circle but takes us to a different place in our relationship.

In other words, faith is a never-ending process. A homier term for the “hermeneutical circle” is “our walk.” Theology is a word for the way we follow Jesus wherever he takes us, the way we walk with God – or the way we turn our backs and walk away.

Jinkins contrasts this messy and unpredictable picture with the idealized linear picture of the theological textbooks he read in his youth, where Church tradition makes sense of our personal experiences, and Scripture keeps Church tradition pure and healthy (67-68). He offers the walk of John McLeod Campbell as something that looks more like a messy circle than a tidy vertical line. My own walk looks rather messy and circular too. Does yours?

Q: If I were a beginning student of Christian doctrine, I might concede that my walk looked messy and circular too, but that would leave me feeling very uneasy. Doesn’t that make Christian doctrine open-ended, circular, vulnerable to corruption by human misconceptions, and ungrounded?