Whither Systematic Theology?
A Systematician Chimes in on a Scandalous Conversation
Amos Yong

What is systematic theology? How is it to be done? How is it best taught? Is systematic theology a viable discipline heading into the twenty-first century, or is it an outmoded remnant of the modern rationalistic mind? These and other related questions have taken on a new urgency for theologians in light of the responses elicited by Mark Noll's book, The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind.\(^1\) As a systematic theologian, I am concerned that some of the remarks of James K. A. Smith and Cheryl Bridges Johns may be used as fuel for the fire against sturdy theological work by those who are not well disposed to the discipline of theology or to systematic theological reflection to begin with.\(^2\) Given that the editors of PNEUMA have presented Smith's article as an invitation to dialogue, herewith follows the musings of a systematician in the hopes that it will not only add something of substance to the conversation, but also that it will encourage Pentecostals in general and theologians in particular to reflect further both on how their craft relates to other disciplines in the academy and on its place in the life of the Church.

Let me say up front that there is much in the responses of Smith and Johns with which I agree, especially in their defense of the Wesleyan and Pentecostal traditions against Noll's charges. Noll's thesis, of

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course, is that “the scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind.” He submits that liability for this unfortunate development can be traced to the patterns of thinking fostered within evangelicalism by dispensational, Holiness and Pentecostal theologies. Whereas Smith’s response is to agree in large part with Noll’s argument only to point out that Noll has missed the mark regarding the broader issue of mistakenly intellectualizing theology, Johns interprets the scandal by contending that Pentecostal glossolalia is at least in part a subversion of language and that the movement is a harbinger of postmodernism, a protest from the margins against totalizing metanarratives of which Noll’s ideal evangelical mind is but one historically conditioned form. Both Smith and Johns are correct in what they affirm. There are, however, some implications to their strategies which I wish they would have addressed. These are related fundamentally to their conception of theology as an academic discipline and its role in the future of Pentecostalism.

Smith questions Noll’s model of integration which does not distinguish between faith as a pretheoretical experience and theology as a theoretical discipline. Because of this failure, Noll falls into the trap of supposing that theology as a theoretical discipline can and should function as an integrating one for other fields of theoretical knowledge. Smith disagrees and suggests instead a Pentecostal model of integration that is based on praxis as derived from a pretheoretical experience (faith). This praxis model he traces in part to the class locations of early Pentecostalism.

There is much to applaud in Smith’s overall analysis. My uneasiness with his response to Noll is not so much in what he says, but in what can be inferred from what he says. His labeling of Noll’s project as “bourgeois” in that there is leisure for reading and study rather than an existence devoted to survival, his acceptance of the Pentecostal

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3Noll, Scandal, 3.
4Ultimately, however, Noll’s convenient whipping boys turn out to be the Scottish Common-Sense philosophy of the 18th and 19th centuries which undergirded the emergence of the fundamentalist mind (see chapter four of Noll, Scandal). He does note, however, that such may be a less than accurate reading of a complex set of historical relationships in light of more recent arguments (p. 87, n. 8) propounded by what is now known as Reformed epistemology. I mention this point in passing to highlight the difficulty of making historical arguments, a difficulty which Noll himself as a first-rate historian should, but fails at times to, recognize in this book.
5This failure on Noll’s part is all the more surprising since the distinction between faith and theology has become a virtually accepted methodological datum in the academic discipline of religious studies since Wilfred Cantwell Smith introduced a redefinition of religion as (subjective) faith and (objective) historical traditions in the early 1960s (cf. his The Meaning and End of Religion [1962; reprint, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991]).