It’s a delight to be here with all of you doing my favorite thing with people who enjoy doing it—Theology. You have an outline. I’ll be following that and alerting you to major headings as we move on.

To begin then, in 1985, Wendell Berry, the reaping prophet from Kentucky wrote a three-page essay aimed at the governing agricultural doctrine in government offices, universities, and corporations that there are too many people on the farm. Economists and others who hold this doctrine, said that small farmers deserve to fail because they were among the least efficient producers. In the rush towards ever-greater mechanization, efficiency, and convenience, Berry points out that we’ve overlooked one important question. A question that is the title of his essay. Namely, what are people for? Not, apparently, for manual labor. And yet, says Berry, in the country, there is work to be done. And woe to us if we forget what we are here to do or how to do it.

To ask what people are for is to raise questions of ontology and teleology. About nature and purpose. About who we are and why we’re here. My question is related, but more specific. What are Theologians for? Who are they? What kind of work do they do?

I think theologians, like farmers, are here to cultivate something—Humanity. To paraphrase our Lord, theologians are called to be and to train farmers of men and women. The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Of course, theology is not an agribusiness profession for a special elite class of persons. All Christians are called to work this farm. All people of faith need to grow in understanding. And we need workers in this field because growth is not automatic and we can’t cultivate humanity in the ways that count by using shortcuts like human growth hormone. There are many human services and community organizations available of course, especially under Obamacare. So, what work in particular can theologians do that other cultivators of humanity cannot?

I want to approach the problem indirectly via the work of two philosophers. Martin Heidegger also asks this question, “What are people?” and answered they are beings in time. “Only human beings,” says Heidegger, “are aware of the passage of time and thus of the angst of human existence.” The Roman philosopher Seneca said something similar centuries earlier and wrote an essay entitled, “On the Shortness of Life,” probably about the same time that Jesus was giving his up, about 49AD.
Seneca says, “the condition from which humans suffer the most,” and which theology ultimately addresses, I want to add, is nothing less than mortality itself. Seneca opens his essay with a quotation from Hippocrates, the father of medicine. "Ars longa, vita brevis" – “Art is long, life is short.” The art in question, by the way, is not music or painting, but medicine. Hippocrates’ term is techne. The idea is that it takes a long time to aquire and perfect practical knowledge and skill, and we only have a short time to do so.

What’s true for the study of medicine is even truer for the study of mortal being. We need wisdom for the craft of life. If Seneca is right, then our fundamental problem for today, as it was in Jesus’ day, is how to learn to live well, despite the shortness of time. To live well... That means devoting oneself to what is most worthy. Or rather, most deserving of being worshiped. And this leads straight to the need for theology. The craft for living well to God, to quote William Ames the puritan, “The craft of living well to God.” By the way, did you know that a number of church fathers were favorably disposed towards Seneca? That there were rumors, probably false, but interesting nevertheless, that he had converted to Christianity? Or that Calvin’s first publication was a commentary on Seneca? At any rate, Seneca himself believed that the real problem is not the mere shortness of time as it is our tendency to waste it. Largely by being preoccupied with peripheral matters. Seneca says, “Of all people, only those who are at leisure—who make time for philosophy—are really alive.” The idea is that they alone keep watch, not over their own lives as they’re unraveling, but they consult the wisdom of the past in order to learn well and live well.

So the time is short, says Seneca, but we need wisdom. I maintain an even better way of investing time is to absorb the wisdom of Jesus Christ. And this leads to the occasion of this lecture, our new MA degree in Systematic Theology. Why invest in that, given the shortness of time? And I won’t mention the price of tuition.

Point two, why pastors have left the farm. Theologians don’t get much respect these days, whether in the academy, society, or the church. Why are people in the bleachers and the pews saying awful things about theology? No doubt the reasons are complex, but a major factor is the demise of doctrine. Doctrine doesn’t get much positive publicity either these days. You’ve heard the typical objections: It’s unspiritual, it’s irrelevant, it’s divisive, it’s boring. What can we say to these accusations except, “Guilty as charged.”

Well, I want to say something different. I acknowledge doctrine can be dry, dull, and debilitating to life and love, yet it need not be so. And that’s not why we have Christian doctrine. Moreover, there is no alternative, doctrine is inevitable. Just as our gestures and our accents give us away as people who have been raised in the Midwest or India or the South or somewhere else, so much of what we believe is evidence of how, when and where we were brought up. In other words, being beings in time, being located in a specific time and place, leads not only to enculturation,
but indoctrination. We’ve all, already been indoctrinated—filled with doctrine. The only question is, whether it is Christian or non-Christian, healthy or toxic.

Be that as it may, the sociologist Allen Wolfe speaks of the strange disappearance of doctrine in the church in his book, The Transformation of American Religion. How we actually live our faith. Wolfe says talk of hell, damnation, and even sin has been replaced by a non-judgmental language of understanding and empathy. Gone are the arguments over doctrine and theology. If believers cannot for the life of them recall what makes Luther different than Calvin, then there is no reason to disagree. Wolfe says, feeling intimate with God, spirituality, matters more to people today than right doctrine—orthodoxy. He also discovered doctrine is an endangered species in conservative and liberal churches alike. He writes, “Evangelical churches lack doctrine because they want to attract new members. Mainline churches lack doctrine because they want to hold on to the declining number of members they have.”

Continuing our query as to why doctrine has fallen on to hard times, another sociologist, Christian Smith at Notre Dame, has written on America’s teenagers. And, he’s discovered that the majority of young people are still religious. They are believers who are active in their churches, but he’s also discovered that they are, and I quote, “incredibly inarticulate about their faith, their beliefs, and practices.” That doesn’t mean they don’t have beliefs, or hold to doctrines. On the contrary, Smith found them saying the same type of thing again and again and again, and he identified their theology with the rubric, moralistic, therapeutic, Deism. MTD for short, which is an apt acronym for a socially transmitted disease.

If those who held this faith could articulate it as a creed, it might look something like this: “I believe in a Creator God who orders and watches over life on earth. I believe that God wants people to be good, to act nice to one another.” This is the moralistic tenet. “I believe that the central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself.” That’s the therapeutic tenet. “I believe that God is not involved in my life except when I need him to be when I have a problem. I believe that good people go to heaven. That almost everybody is good, or at least nice. Virtual worlds without end. Amen.” That’s what I imagine their creed to be. And this too is doctrine, but, alas, it expresses an un biblical, non-Trinitarian faith.

I saw a recent blog that gives ten reasons why our kids leave Evangelical churches. And interestingly enough, half of the reasons given have to do with the poor diet of doctrine they’ve been fed. They’ve been given cultural junk food in a misguided attempt to sound cool and relevant. And as a result, they are now spiritually and intellectually malnourished. We’ve exchanged their theological birthright—catechism—for a mess of cultural pottage—choruses. The blogger says, “We’ve traded a historic, objective, faithful pottage based on God’s graciousness towards us for a modern, subjective, pragmatic gospel based upon achieving our goal by following life’s strategies. Rather than being faithful to the foolish simplicity of the gospel of the cross, we’ve set our goal on being successful at growing crowds with
this gospel of glory. But this new gospel saves no one. Our kids leave because we have failed to deliver to them the faith delivered once for all to the Church.

Not everyone’s leaving, of course. St. John’s Anglican Cathedral in Brisbane, Australia, is not only keeping its young people, but attracting flocks. And the pastor chalks it up to the fact that they have replaced doctrine with narrative. The Bible’s a story, not raw material for constructing systematic theology. The nice thing about narrative theology, it invites people to fit their own life stories into something meaningful and compelling. Not a thick system, but dynamic story. That’s what the pastor in Brisbane thinks. Is system really the villain of the story where story is the hero? Is doctrine the problem where narrative is the solution? Do we really have to choose between having intellectual convictions and participating in a meaningful story? And I think the contrast is too simplistic. I’ve elsewhere made the case that doctrine gives directions to individuals and communities for right participation in God’s story. The drama of redemption. That story about Christ making all things new. And on this feud, doctrine isn’t inimical to the story, it’s a form of story appreciation. Think music appreciation. It enables us to join in more effectively and affectively. But the problem again is that doctrine has come to be associated with something that is closed, fixed, and lifeless. So, for many in the 21st Century sea of Christianity, that doctrine is dead in the water. My claim, however, and what follows is that Christian doctrine is necessary for the human flourishing of individuals and communities. It is vital and vibrant, not dead and dull.

So what is a theologian? I’m a theologian. One whose mission is to speak well of God. It’s a dangerous business. Blasphemy is the constant occupational hazard. It’s ever so tempting, you see, to create God in one’s own image, or in the image of one’s favorite ideology, political party, or special interest group. So the last words of the first letter of John must also be the theologian’s first and lasting thought. “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”

Speaking well of God also involves preserving certain tensions. For example, God is not just love, he is loving and just. There’s a tension. That makes theology something of a high-wire act. It’s embracing enterprise, as G. K. Chesterton says in his book, Orthodoxy, “An inch is everything when you are balancing.” The tensions matter.

It’s important to be clear though on what theologians are not. Theologians are not entertainers. They may be tightrope walkers, but they’re not in a circus. They’re not here just to pass the time. They may play the fool in the course of bearing countercultural witness, but fools for Christ mean serious business. Nor are theologians underwriters of the status quo. Their critics often portray them in this way, and sadly we can probably think of examples of people who invoke God’s way in support of some ideology or another, such as national socialism during Nazi Germany. And perhaps homegrown national capitalism isn’t much better. But, theologians should not deploy doctrine in support of any institutional power interest. Nor are theologians overlords in the academy that is lording it over other disciplines like biology, astronomy, and history. If theologians could be chess pieces,
I would choose not to be the queen, but, of course, the bishop, moving laterally through the ranks, making interdisciplinary connections. At the same time, theologians are not pretenders in the academy either, despite what secularists and skeptics say. Listen for example to Richard Dawkins. Dawkins complains, “What has theology ever said that is of the smallest use to anybody? If all the achievements of theologians were wiped out tomorrow, would anyone notice? Even the bad achievements of scientists—the bombs, sonar-guided whaling vessels—at least these work. The achievements of theologians don’t do anything, don’t affect anything, don’t mean anything. What makes anyone think that theology is a subject at all?” Thus, Dawkins. And he poses a fair question. I’ve paraphrased it simply by asking, “What are theologians for?”

I want to begin answering now by looking at six metaphors that begin to say what theologians are for. Do remember that metaphors say “is” and “is not.” And each of these six models captures some aspect of the theologian’s vocation, but not everything. My own preference, as you’ll see, will be for the last three. But in the first place, theologians have been compared to philosophers seeking wisdom. Both ask big questions about the nature of reality and the meaning of the whole. And as precisely this feature, according to Cardinal Newman, that makes theology a precious resource in the university, namely as a guard against reductionism. Because, to speak of God is to at least remind other academic disciplines of their own incompleteness. It’s easier than ever for universities in our time to lose wisdom and knowledge, and knowledge and information, in this era of increasing specialization. Particularly when theology is excluded from the disciplinary ranks. The weakness of viewing theology as a species of philosophy is the danger that it might encourage speculation. That is, thinking about the whole of reality apart from God’s self-manifestation and concrete activity, in history and in Jesus Christ. There may be some things we can know about God by contemplating the concept perfect being, but there’s always the danger that we may foist our own culturally conditioned notions of perfection onto God. Metaphysician heal thyself.

A second portrait. Friedrich Schleiermacher defines theology as “the science of faith and says that doctrines are accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech. So theologians are like poets who try to find the right words for what they’ve experienced. Now I agree that theology, like poetry, is a species of word craft, but theology cannot simply be poetry without remainder, or then the only thing with which it would be accountable would be our own subjective experience.

And now these lead to the third image, the sociologist whose task is to set forth in speech, not the experience of an individual, but a group. On this view, the theologian is a spokesperson who sets forth in speech the grammar of Christian faith, of life together. What Stan Grentz calls “the mosaic of community belief,” or what George Lindbeck calls, “the cultural linguistic framework of the Church.” This image rightly highlights the theologian’s role in formulating the Church’s corporate identity and mission, but wrongly locates the norms in the Church’s own practice. This makes it
difficult, if not impossible, to challenge in a prophetic way what the church is doing, the status quo, with a, “Thus sayeth the Lord.”

So I want to turn to three images that represent my own pilgrim’s progress through the land of theology. I spent about a decade exploring the model of the theologian as hermeneutician, because Scripture is the soul of theology and so it only follows that the principles of interpretation become central to the task. Hermeneutics goes further than exegesis because it explains not only what the text meant to its original readers, but what it means for us today. The strength of this image is that its focus is on the text. The weakness, however, is that it may be too beholden to secular theories of meaning and interpretation—nasty things like speech acts. And that weakness has led me to another image, which intentionally tries to conform theology’s method to its subject matter. Scripture does more than state universal truth; it’s a transcript and a medium of God’s word and acts. And so, I think it follows that the essence of Christianity is dramatic. So in the drama of doctrine I explored doctrine as a model of theatrical direction. Instructing us how to participate in what God is doing in history, in Jesus, through the Spirit. And so the theologian here resembles what in the world of theater is called the dramaturge, a person who researches the meaning of the play and then advises the director and the performing company on the best way to perform it with creative fidelity in our own cultural space and time. So what I think dramaturgy adds to hermeneutics is the idea that our most important interpretations of Scripture are our lived performances, the way we do church. Christianity, after all, is a way. And theology here is a matter of giving direction for those who want to walk across the stage of the world—the way Jesus did.

So the Bible’s a transcript of past action, a script that helps orient the church to its present and its future. But, moving on to the next image, I note that script has a pharmaceutical as well as a theatrical sense. It’s a shorthand for prescription, and a prescription is direction for taking medicine. Now one immediate benefit of this medicinal model is it is easier to find a biblical warrant for it. Not only does Jesus heal dramatically, but he refers to himself as a physician. In addition, the author of the biggest single textual block in the New Testament, the two volume work Luke-Acts, was, according to tradition, written by Luke, the beloved physician mentioned by Paul in Colossians 4:14. But we need to turn to tradition in order to get the fullest picture of the theologian as a doctor of the Church. So, we move onto doctors of the church.

In the first centuries, teachers who were exceptionally wise in communicating the meaning of Jesus Christ came to be called the church fathers. Of these, some were singled out with the additionally title, doctor of the church. At first it was an informal rubric, but the Roman Catholic Church eventually recognized these doctors in an official way. And here I note that while there are no women priests in the Catholic Church, there are two doctors—Teresa of Ávila and Catherine of Siena. The Roman Catholic Church lists three requirements for this distinguished rank: holiness of life, importance and orthodoxy of writings, and official church
recognition. Pope Benedict XVI, aka Joseph Rotsinger, wrote a book entitled *Doctors of the Church* and treats all 32, including St. Ceril of Alexandria, Doctor of the Incarnation, Leo the Great, Doctor of the Unity of the Church; Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor; and, of course, Augustine, the Doctor of Grace, also called Doctor of Doctors. Francis Cardinal George wrote the introduction to Benedict’s book, and in it, he articulates a mission statement for the church and the theologian alike. He says, “The mission of the Church at every age is to introduce the world to Christ, its Savior. The Church cannot accomplish her mission without learned men and women who are saints of god. These are the Doctors of the Church.” And, what I particularly appreciate about George’s introduction is the special Christological remit of the doctor of the church. George goes on to say, “They help us to answer questions about Jesus; who he is, what he taught, what he wants us to do, and how to be more like Him.”

Protestants also speak of doctors of the church, at least in the reformed tradition, where they’re said to serve the institutional church in its God-given task of interpreting Scripture. This is what the Reformers highlight about doctors of the church, they’re interpreters. The early Reformers saw these doctors as a distinct class of ministers. The Ecclesiastical Ordinances that governed Calvin’s Geneva open with this statement: “There are four orders of offices that our Lord instituted for the government of His Church: Pastors, Doctors, Elders, Deacons.” Calvin says, “Doctors have no special concern with the discipline or the administration of the sacraments or with admonitions and exhortations, but only with the interpretation of the Scriptures, so that pure and sound doctrine may be retained among believers.” Johannes Wolleb, a 17th Century Swiss Reformed Theologian, describes the difference between pastors and doctors this way: “The former are chiefly intent upon moving their auditors, the latter upon teaching them.”

There was some dispute among the Reformed about the interpretation of Ephesians 4:11, that passage that pertains to the gifts that the ascended Christ gives to the Church. “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors, and teachers.” The dispute concerns the last phrase. Does it designate one office or two? Pastors and teachers. Scott Manetsch notes with regard to doctors of the church, that in Calvin’s Geneva, their mandate extended beyond the local congregation to the larger church. And it included the responsibility of teaching future pastors and protecting the church from doctrinal error. Doctors of the church then are charged with caring for the preservation and purity of doctrine, its diffusion among the young, and the training of future ministers. Now in his commentary on Ephesians 4:11, Calvin says, “I have no objection to pastors being called doctors so long as we realize that there is another kind of doctor who superintends both the education of pastors and the instruction of the whole church.”

Now, the church of Scotland under John Knox accepted Calvin’s distinction; two offices, pastor and doctor. According to Knox, the doctor’s special remit is to interpret scripture and refute errors, especially those taught in schools and universities. The Church of Scotland published in 1578, something called the Second
Book of Discipline, and chapter five of this book of church discipline specifies the role of doctors in the church. “They are to assist the pastor in the government of the Kierch, but not to minister the sacraments or celebrate marriage. Instead, the doctor’s office is to open up the mind of the Spirit of God in the Scriptures to the end that the faithful may be instructed and sound doctrine taught.” And they go on to divide pastors from doctors with this thought: “The doctor is different from the pastor, for the doctor is given the word of knowledge to open up by simple teaching the mysteries of the faith, but the pastor is given the gift of wisdom to apply the same.”

This raises the question, where do doctors belong? Is there a doctor in the church? Some have argued that there never were any doctors in the Church of Scotland except those who taught divinity in the universities. Which is precisely the role I had for eight years: doctor in the university, elder in the church. I wonder, as an Evangelical, to what extent that dichotomy, what the present day dichotomy between doctrine and life owes its existence to this earlier dichotomy between pastor and doctor. Sometimes Paul or Calvin read Ephesians 4:11 as referring to pastors and teachers as if they were two different people altogether, as I mentioned. Like the American tourist who wandered through Edinburgh and exclaimed in horror to her husband, “Look honey, they’ve buried two men in the same grave! It says right here, ‘Here lies a pastor and a theologian.’”

But what if “doctor” refers not to a specific office so much as a distinct gift? Paul, after all, may well be using the two terms to describe the same office. Jerome thought Paul was in his commentary. Jerome says, “No one ought to assume to himself the name of pastor unless he is able to teach them whom he feeds.” So perhaps we Evangelicals could settle what the Reformed haven’t and urge shepherds to think of themselves as doctors as well. What the Church needs now is pastor-theologians.

Section Five: “Why Doctrine Matters.” I believe there is biblical warrant for linking pastor and doctor, pastor and theologian. Surely it’s no coincidence that Paul’s Pastoral Epistles—1 and 2 Timothy and Titus—are replete with references to doctrine. Didascalia. Because doctrine, as we see in these epistles, exercises pastoral functions. It corrects error, it deepens understanding, it fosters wisdom, it funds endurance, and it encourages godliness. The term, didascalia, occurs some 21 times in the New Testament, 15 of which are in the Pastoral Epistles. This statistic alone emboldens me to suggest that we call 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, the Doctoral Epistles. Please adopt that habit from now on. Didascalia, however, is neither intrinsically Christian, or, necessarily, beneficial, because the other thing we learn from the Pastoral Epistles is that there are indoctrinations into falsehood. False doctrine is damaging and disastrous, and, unfortunately, it abounds which is why Paul writes so many of his epistles.

So one thing that theologians are for, as Paul says to Timothy, is to distinguish true from false teaching. And Paul uses a particularly interesting qualifier to make this
Sound doctrine matters because it is vital to life. This Greek term γθείνωσ διδασκαλία—sound doctrine. Sound doctrine matters because it is vital to life. This Greek term γθείνωσ is the word from which we get our word “hygienic”. It’s a medical term. And at least one commentator thinks that its use may show the influence of the beloved physician Luke on Paul. Another commentator says that Paul’s use of the term resembles that of ancient philosophers who depicted their opponents’ positions as sick. Sound doctrine is not only true, but healthy; health-producing. And so it stands in contrast with doctrine that is toxic or noxious, which is inimical to the community’s well-being.

Now, Paul uses this phrase, “sound doctrine,” as a contrast term, not two ideas, but two particular practices. The contradiction of sound doctrine involves, says Paul, striking one’s parents, lying, and kidnapping. We might have expected mention of a Christological heresy or some other doctrinal matter, but doctrine for Paul is sound because it is conducive to healthy habits of life, to godliness.

What makes doctrine sound? Paul’s answer is that doctrine is sound when it is in “accordance with the Gospel of the glory of God” (1 Timothy 1:11). The Gospel, then, is the standard of soundness because it relates with what the Father has done in the Son through the Spirit. It tells us who God is and what God is doing. Sound doctrine corresponds and contributes to the unfolding of God’s plan of salvation, so much so that we could form a new axiom. The hygienic is the economic and vice versa.

So, a theologian is a doctor of the church who administers doses of doctrine to the body of Christ. With this medical imagery in mind, I want us to return to the question of what theologians are for by thinking about what we can do with doctrine, which is the immediate product of our work. First, if we’re to avoid being hypocrites, we have to believe what we teach. We have to subscribe to apostolic teaching, with real conviction and passion. We have to make a whole person commitment to the truth. Calvin says, “In a pastor there is demanded not only learning, but such zeal for pure doctrine as never to depart from it.” Second, as we’ve seen there’s false teaching, so doctors have to proscribe false teaching—proscribe false teaching—doctrines of demons. This is what Tertullian does in his book, Prescription Against Heretics—sorry for the confusion, but what he really meant to say was “proscription”—and in chapter 2, he compares heresies to fever. Both heresies and fever weaken the body and destroy life, especially in those who are already weak in body or in faith; though Tertullian notes that heresies, because they lead to eternal death, bear the heat of a stronger fire. The point is that doctors of the church have to recognize fevers and other debilitating illnesses in the body of Christ that can wreak havoc. Calvin says, “On this point, the pastor ought to have two voices: one for gathering the sheep, another for warding off and driving away wolves.”

Third, what do we do with doctrine? In the Pastoral Epistles, the sure word of the Gospel, Apostolic testimony, is the touchstone for soundness. Now, if evil is nonbeing and Satan the Father of Lies and if foolishness is being oriented towards
nothingness, then surely the remedy for false teaching, for lies, is a good dose of reality. And this is what the doctor of the church first and foremost is, and is for—ministering reality. Remember Aristotle’s famous definition of truth, “To say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true.” Well, one reason why doctrine is sound, conducive to wisdom and shalom, is because it is true. Sound doctrine says of what is that it is. Rather, sound doctrine says of what is in Christ that it is. The Gospel is a sure word because it is a reliable indicator of reality. In describing what the Father has done in the Son through the Spirit we understand the whole—the whole of reality. All things were created through Him and for Him. In Him, Christ, all things hold together. So, to describe what is in Christ is to relate the parts to the whole. Such descriptions yield understanding. So, thinking theologically means understanding persons, events, things, and ideas in relation to what is in Christ. Theologians are for describing what was, what is, and what is to come, in Christ.

So what is in Christ? Paul says, “All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). But let us be more specific. First, what is in Christ is perfect deity. “The Son exegetes the Father” (John 1:18). “He is the exact imprint of God’s nature” (Hebrews 1:3). What there is in Christ is God’s word—the law, the prophets, the promise of God—all fulfilled. Further, what is in Christ are the divine perfections of the divine nature. What theologians describe, then, when they say what is in Christ is the essence of God. God is love. God is light. God is life. So, if it is knowledge of God that you seek, you had best look to Christ.

But secondly, in describing what is in Christ, we’re also describing true humanity. Men and women have been created in God’s own image and the children of Adam have defaced it, so only Jesus is the perfect image of God. The Son of Man is the second Adam, the exemplary covenant’s servant, the perfect son. So if it’s knowledge of yourself that you seek, you had best look to Jesus Christ.

And then a third thing we find in Christ is the relationship between God and man that the Son establishes. “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). What theologians are ultimately for is the joyful publication of that; the news that redemption has been wrought in Christ. If anyone is in Christ, behold, he is a new creation. In Christ then, there is salvation, the salve for our souls. This is the wonderful vocation of the theologian: to announce the good news of this new reconciled creation for which the old alienated creation has been groaning, and to unpack all the implications of what is in Christ. So, if it’s hope of redemption that you seek, you had best look to Jesus Christ and Him only.

Well, we could say much more about this third aspect of what is in Christ, because what is in Christ is simply the first-fruits of what will be in Christ. Christ will eventually fill all. But what we find is the life, light, and love of God, the reconciled people of God, we find Israel and the Church of Christ, we find Jew and Greek. And if we look hard enough, we see ourselves, adopted children in Christ. We see union and communion. So when theologians say what is and is to come in Christ Jesus,
they fulfill their vocations as stewards of the mysteries of God, these mysteries that lie at the heart of the Scriptures.

And then finally, prescription. It’s well known that Paul in many of his epistles has imperatives that follow the indicatives. And, so too, in the model I’m suggesting here. Doctors of the church offer prescriptions, directions for the people of God to follow for their salvation and their spiritual health. Well, what is the prescription? What is the remedy for what ails us? It’s simply to conform and correspond and to accept joyfully what is in Christ. This is our Christian vocation, to correspond to what is in Christ. To align our speech and action with what is truly real. To be or not to be in Christ, that’s the only question we have to ask. The most important thing doctors of the church can prescribe, then, is being in Christ. Paul says, “For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” To act out our union with Christ has nothing to do with pretending. To follow doctrinal prescription is not to make believe. It’s rather, in faith, to lay hold of something real, something that is most real that will endure forever and ever—the promises of God. Being in Christ is the only thing in heaven or on earth that has the power to preserve and transform us, to make an ultimate difference in our lives. It is real. So, to describe what is in Christ is to minister reality.

Okay, some summary theses. Do no harm. Hippocrates got that far, but doctors of the church march to the beat of a different physician. One who does not simply avoid doing harm but does positive good. Jesus makes well. And theologians promote well-being by teaching sound doctrine; announcing what is in Christ and unpacking all the implications. So, smoking is hazardous to your health, but doctrine—sound doctrine—is advantageous.

Seven summary theses: Doctrine tells us who God is and what God is doing in Christ. So, doctors of the church prescribe doctrine in order to preserve the integrity of our Christian witness. Second, doctrine tells us who and what we are in Jesus Christ. And when doctors of the church prescribe doctrine to preserve the integrity of Christian identity. We’re not like the other nations, we’re a holy nation, a people of a new covenant. Third, doctrine says of what is in Christ that it is. Doctors of the church prescribe doctrine in order, as I’ve said, to minister reality—the only reliable tonic to the toxins of meaninglessness and nothingness. Fourth, doctrine restores sinners to their senses. Doctors of the church prescribe doctrine to wake up people who are sleepwalking their way through life, helping us see with the eyes of the heart the bright contours of the splendors of God revealed in Christ. Fifth, doctrine provides a fiduciary framework for understanding God, the world, and ourselves. And doctors of the church prescribe it to dissipate the mist of confusion and apathy about the meaning of life. Sixth, doctrine directs the church in the way of wisdom, godliness, and human flourishing. If we prescribe doctrine, we’re clarifying the mission of the church and we’re answering another question, maybe for another time, what are the people of God for? And seventhly, doctrine instructs not only the head, but orients the heart and guides the hand. Doctors of the church prescribe doctrine so that our faith, hope, and love, our credenda, spiranda, and agenda, will go with the grain of
the Gospel and correspond to the historical and eschatological reality of what is in Christ.

So, in sum, theology sets forth in speech what is in Christ. And at its best, it’s the attempt to set forth in persons what Christ is like. That is, doctrine is for growing disciples. C. S. Lewis said, “Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.” So this is where doctrine belongs: in the body of Christ. Prescription medication that remains in the bottle is of no use to anyone. Its healing power is released only as the body ingests and absorbs it. So it’s one thing to have these prescriptions, but we have to take them, and this pertains to doctrine as well. And yet, some Christians refuse to take their castor oil, preferring to swill the low-intellectual, calorie, sickly-sweet soft drinks of popular culture. But it’s largely thanks to the doctoral work of pastor-theologians that doctrine, heavenly medicine from above, gets into the bloodstream of the body of Christ. I’m suggesting, then, that the pastor-theologian is the church’s primary care physician. Problem is, too many pastors have stopped doctoring.

So what are theologians for? To train pastors, yes. But also, in some sense, to be pastors, to unite in one person two natures. The pastor-doctor should be Evangelicalism’s default public theologian. We have to diagnose what ails the body of Christ and then we have to discern how what is in Christ heals that situation.

So we can conclude, then, what is the real work of theology? Remember that Seneca worried that people are wasting life because they make no time for philosophy. I agree with his diagnosis, but not his solution. Philosophy doesn’t have compelling answers to what ails us. Theology does. And so, we can answer Richard Dawkins’ questions of whether theologians have ever done something that is of the smallest use to anybody. They have. Theologians have found, if not the cure, then at least the prescription for dealing with cancer. I’m serious. Knowing Christ and the power of His resurrection is the ultimate cure for every disease and death itself. O Cancer, where is thy victory? O Cancer, where is thy sting? And the final analysis to describe what is in Christ is to proclaim victory to the oppressed and life eternal to the dying. So, theologians know, in light of what is in Christ, how to deal with the shortness of life. By redeeming the time. That’s what Paul says in Ephesians 5:16. By redeeming the time, by responding wisely, even defiantly, to mortality. By describing and then demonstrating in the Christian community the union and communion we have with Christ.

So, what are theologians for? We can now answer. The real work of theology is, indeed, farming. Theologians are for growing healthy disciples who know how to live along the grain of the created order as it is being renewed in Christ. Theologians are for ministering health to the body of Christ, for helping its members to become little Christs. This is no waste of time. It is the way to redeem the time by cultivating godliness that is the lived knowledge of God. We might say that the real work of theology is the work of getting real, of conforming our speech, thought, and actions to the mind and heart of Jesus Christ who is the index of reality, the repository of all
truth, goodness and beauty. So only appropriate, I think, to close with a prescription cum benediction:

Hold fast to what is in Christ—the grace of our Lord Jesus the Son of God, the Love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit—our vision, hope, strength, and cure. Hold fast to what is in Christ, this day and forevermore. Amen.