

# Propositions on Christian Theology



Propositions on  
Christian Theology

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A Pilgrim Walks the Plank

Kim Fabricius

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*In memory of my father,  
who would have been proud to see his prodigal in print—  
but wouldn't have believed a word of it.*



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# Foreword

Mike Higton

A foreword is meant to suggest, as pithily and incisively as possible, a possible route in to an otherwise forbidding book. But what is a foreword writer to do when the book to which he is welcoming readers is *nothing but* pith and incisiveness, *nothing but* a collection of inviting doors into its subject matter? This book does not need a foreword as much as it needs three hundred afterwords: it sets three hundred hares racing,<sup>1</sup> and invites the reader to chase each one of them as it runs on a track leading deep into the subject matter of theology.

Nevertheless, for all the lightness of touch, all the acidic puns, all the firework scatter of ideas, this is a serious book on serious business. Kim Fabricius is one of God's kidnappers, commissioned to take every thought captive to the triune God who comes to the world in Jesus Christ. His propositions are designed to captivate you, truss you up, and deliver you to the feet of the one whose grace upholds the world, who can crucify you and raise you up, who can cut the strings of delusion and despair by which your supposedly free life is bound—and to whom astonished worship and delighted service are the only proper response.

You will find some propositions in this book on dull sermons

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1. 291.5 hares, to be precise. Or 281.5 if, like me, you prefer not to count the hares that Kim has persuaded to play baseball.

and others on holy laughter, some on the Nicene creed and others on the nature of heresy, some on human sexuality and others on all-too-human hypocrisy, some on the role of angels and others on the location of hell, and still others on fasting and feasting, peace and policing, grace and gratitude—but don't be fooled into thinking that it is simply a scattershot miscellany. Proposition by proposition, aphorism by aphorism, this book provides a solid training in how to *think* theologically—how to break and remake your thought in the light of God's grace.

Look, for instance, at the ten propositions on being human. You will find out that human being is contingent, self-contradictory, physical, spiritual, relational, responsible, ludic, doxological, Christ-like and glorified. You might read all this simply as a bricolage of good ideas, a commonplace book of clippings from years of theological reading. Or you might read it as some kind of catechism: a conceptual check-up, good for pointing out ways in which your own thinking about human nature needs repair or re-tuning—not providing the kind of systematic instructions you would need if you wanted to build a car from scratch, but the kind that can help you diagnose most of the typical rattles, lurches and collapses from which this make suffers. But (provided you take care to read the propositions on spirituality later in the book) you can also read these propositions as a manual of spiritual discipline: a mirror of self-examination (and so of church-examination and of world-examination), and a prompt to penitence, prayer, and praise. These are propositions that have the capacity, like all good theology, to get under your skin and to fester there. They are pithy and witty not so that you can race through and have done with them, but so that you can slow down and live with each one for a while. Think of each proposition as a hammer blow—and realise that you would do well to pause after each, just to check whether anything is broken.

Of course, you won't (and shouldn't) agree with all of them. Some of them will irritate you. Some of them will make you grind your teeth. That is just as it should be. But here's another good

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thing about the book. Broken down into propositions, mostly arranged in overs ten balls long, it is easy to keep score (though it will look more like a cricket than a baseball score). As you read it through, taking your time, working out where and why you agree and where and why you disagree, you can tot up exactly what percentage of it you agree with. And this in turn is great because—oh. Hold on a moment I was just about to say that this is great because it opens up whole new possibilities of a statistical approach to theological studies—but I’ve just remembered that there are a couple of propositions in the book about theology as a science, and I’m not sure that what I’ve just suggested lines up with what those propositions recommend. I hope you won’t mind waiting here while I look those propositions up again, to check that I’ve not gone astray. I’ll be back in a moment—unless, of course, another proposition distracts me on the way ...



No piracy, but there is a plank  
to walk over seventy thousand fathoms,  
as Kierkegaard would say, and far out  
from the land. I have abandoned  
my theories, the easier certainties  
of belief. There are no handrails to grasp.

R. S. Thomas  
from "Balance"<sup>1</sup>

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1. R.S. Thomas, "Balance", in *Frequencies* (London: Macmillan, 1978).



# Introduction

Insomnia can be a terrible affliction in church during the sermon; it's not much fun for the pastor in the manse either. But here is how a curse became a blessing.

One dreary morning in January 2006, just after midnight, sleepless in Swansea, South Wales, I was sitting at my desk, too agitated to read or surf or even watch TV. In desperation I turned to prayer. Not a chance. I was overwhelmed by distractions. But then I thought, "This might be a waste of time, but it is still prayer, isn't it?"

And then I had an idea: Why not put down some thoughts on prayer, particularly if they seem outrageous, or even idiotic. So I started typing, numbering my thoughts as I went along. At about seven or eight, I thought, "Hey, I've got a decalogue here!" So I rounded them off and polished them up, and then posted them on "Connexions", the blog of my colleague and good friend Richard Hall: "Ten Provocative Propositions on Prayer."

The feedback—the comments—astonished me. People liked them, found them stimulating and helpful. They were re-blogged, downloaded, and used for private reflection and group discussion. So a few weeks later, same insomnia, same purgatory, another idea: How about "Ten Propositions on Hell"? Done. Even more comments—but not all of them favorable! But that was fine, because though applause is great, my aim was to goad people into some lateral theological thinking by taking on a big theme in a punchy, conversational style (I'm from New York). My aim has never been to be systematic or comprehensive, but mischievously suggestive.

Next up was "The Trinity," which was posted not only on "Connexions" but also on "Faith and Theology," the brilliant blog of the young Australian theologian Dr. Benjamin Myers, where the pos-

itive response, often now from the academy, was overwhelming—and humbling. And from there, over the next eighteen months, I went on a roll, feeding Dr. Myers a steady supply of my “Propositions,” and, immensely encouraged, watching and replying as they made their way around the blogosphere and out into churches and classrooms for worship and study.

Along the way the Propositions ceased to be propositions in the strict sense, as they expanded from terse theses into more substantial paragraphs, but the number stayed the same (with one-and-a-half exceptions) and the name stuck. I have further expanded many of them for publication, and revised them too, not least in response to the learned and astute comments they triggered. My work is now the work of others too, as, actually, it has always been. I don’t think that I have had an original thought in my life. I’m an intellectual thief, though I try to acknowledge the sources of my goods when I fence them. Where I fail, please accept my apologies—and put it down to my memory, not my morals.

Linking some of my hymns with the propositions was an idea that came late in the day, but I like to think that on this occasion it was a case of catching the owl of Minerva just before take-off. Almost all the hymns pre-date the Propositions, which suggests that the hymns are the real texts of this little book, the Propositions commentary. You know the old saying *lex orandi, lex credendi*—it might well be re-phrased *lex canendi, lex credendi* (as any Methodist will tell you). Desmond Tutu says that you should never trust a bishop who can’t dance. Likewise you should never trust a theologian who doesn’t sing. In heaven doctrine is not done in prose: “The end is music.”<sup>1</sup>

Finally, may I sing the praises of a few people: first, Dr. Myers, whose keen eye and judicious advice, while making me blush, have perhaps saved me from a more public embarrassment; and second, the folk at Carolina Academic Press, whose interest, attentiveness, and patience have been exceptional.

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1. Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 369.