

## DOING THEOLOGY FOR THE CHURCH\*

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Not long ago we were informed of a Sunday School teacher who had instructed his class on the doctrine of man in the image of God. In our opinion his conclusion on the subject were extremely questionable and so we inquired as to the source of his understanding. What had he used for a guide to help in the study of this area? The response was that he had only been using his Bible and a concordance. Now obviously, these sources are central to the task of expositing God's truth. But the question still may be raised with such a reply: Why was there no use made of some of the many theological discussions of the subject? With a minimal amount of time, this teacher could have compared his thinking with many who have investigated this subject far more extensively than the average church teacher is permitted. But he didn't, and his case is all too typical.

This example is not to cast aspersions on the many faithful teachers in the evangelical church. It is rather to point to the evident fact that theology (and we are here using this term for the various theological disciplines) is not seriously penetrating the church. To be sure, the church is not totally barren of theological concepts, but these often come from sources other than the traditionally recognized theologians. The result is often something less than the finest of evangelical theological thinking and at other times rampant confusion bordering on false doctrine. In a report of a simple biblical literacy test conducted by a pastor for the adults of his church, 63% had to be classified as biblically illiterate. There was complete confusion as to the number of converts baptized by Jesus ranging from none (which is correct) up to 300,000. Jesus was listed as living in the time of Julius Caesar, King Saul and King Solomon. For the two great commandments, the seventh commandment prohibiting adultery received several votes. (Thomas R. Pendell, "Biblical Literacy Test," *The Christian Century*, October 21, 1959, p. 1213). While the test concerned primarily Bible knowledge, it can be safely said that theological questions would have fared no better. The tragedy is that there exists not only a situation of biblical and theological ignorance, but that which is undoubtedly its correlative, a lack of concern on the part of many for theology.

A lengthy apologetic need hardly be made among theologians for the necessity or desirability of theology in the church. However, this necessity has not always captured the imagination of the general church member.

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Too often the attitude is that described by Norman Perrin of the German feeling, "For Germany theological discussion has been, and up to a point still is, the province of the academically trained theologian rather than that of the general lay member of the church" (Norman Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, p. 35). While not all Christians are to be theologians in the sense of being peculiarly summoned to the task of leading in the theological thought, yet according to the Protestant principle of the perspicuity of Scripture and the individual responsibility before God, every believer is in a real sense responsible to be his own theologian. To abdicate the theological domain to specialists either through lack of interest or awe of the technicalities involved is not only harmful but impossible. The truth is that every believer is already a theologian. Accepting Warfield's definition of theology as "that science which treats of God and of the relations between God and the universe" ("The Idea of Systematic Theology," *Studies in Theology*, London: Oxford University Press, 1932, p. 56), every believer who knows God and himself therefore partakes of the nature of a theologian making the knowledge of God a part of our world of thought. Since the human mind is not content with chaotic bits of knowledge, the impulse is present in all believers to integrate the revelation of God into their consciousness.

Although it is certainly not the whole of church life, there is a place for a true intellectual love of God and neighbor as well as the love of "heart and soul and strength." Man is also mind. In the words of H. Richard Niebuhr, "The coldness of an intellectual approach unaccompanied by affection is matched by the febrile extravagance of unreasoning sentiment; the aloofness of uncommitted understanding has its counterpart in the possessiveness of unintelligent loyalty. When the whole man is active the mind is also active; when the whole church is at work it thinks and considers no less than it worships, proclaims, suffers, rejoices, and fights" (H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956, p. 111).

The intellectual understanding of the faith renders service to the church in many ways. William Barclay in a brief essay entitled "Why Theology?" (*Faith and Thought, Journal of the Victorian Institute*, 97:46-51 Winter, 1968) lists four necessities for its practice. While specialists may take the lead, they cannot perform these requirements vicariously for the church. (1) "Theology is necessary to satisfy the mind." Most at least are not content simply to know and to appropriate the salvation of God in Christ. It must also be understood. (2) "Theology is necessary for teaching and for apologetic purposes." Phillips Brooks once said, "Doctrine is truth considered with reference to being taught." With the significant contemporary evangelistic thrusts of the church, the need of a clear, precise theology was never more urgent. It is improper to be argumentative over the faith, but it is not erroneous to argue for the faith. Peter urges all of his readers to be "...ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you..." (1 Peter 3:15). The words *argue* and *dispute* frequently appear in the ministry of the early

Christians in the book of Acts. In order to enter the ideological fray the believer requires some theological equipment. (3) "Theology is necessary as a test and touchstone." The church has beliefs and principles by which the allegiance of its members is judged. These beliefs and principles come from theological thinking. (4) Finally, theology is necessary for ethics. It is possible to separate how a man acts and thinks, but not logically or consistently, and not for long. "For as he thinketh in his heart so is he," the biblical writer reminds us. If the church is to live in the world with a life style that issues in glory to God, it must think and think deeply, not only of personal ethics, but of the implications of the biblical faith for social, economic, and political ethics as well. These necessities touch the heart of the church's life and mission; they are not optional peripheries. To the same extent that theological indifference is sustained, the church is vitiated.

But theology is is not only mandatory for the healthy functioning of the church, it is postulated by the very nature of the church. If theologians are members of the body of Christ, they have a spiritual ministry even as every member "for the common good" of the body. For an individual to attempt to ignore the theological thought of the church and to begin and end with his own doctrines is to depreciate the manifestations of the Spirit embodied in the life ministries of many of God's servants today as well as down through the history of the church. The revelation of God inscribed in the Word must always be the immediate object of study. The Bible is the norm of the church and not theology. But to study only the Bible is not only a fraudulent claim, for no one is completely isolated from outside influence, it is a disregarding of the gifts of teaching in the church.

It is not our purpose to explore all of the reasons for the nonchalant attitude of many toward theological studies. Undoubtedly the intellectual and cultural milieu of our day with its anti-metaphysical, experience centered climate contributes much to the non-theological attitude. The popular reporting of theological fadism in the religion columns of newspapers and magazines is certainly also a factor. It does not require an uncanny imagination to see how many intelligent church people could become disenchanted with the theological elite after reading of the demise of God or even the demand to demythologize the Scriptures. It is perfectly understandable how they might come to the conclusion that they have a surer grip on God and His truth than the theologians and need not waste their time with their speculative musings.

All these reasons aside, however, it is still necessary to ask the question, are theologians who seek to be faithful to the Christian faith doing theology for the church? Granted that the lack of theological acumen on the part of many church members is due to some factors beyond the control of the professional theologian, are there factors of responsibility which also rest upon him? We would like to suggest that there are and that we need to keep them in mind in all of our theological endeavor.

Perhaps the fundamental impetus of our thoughts comes from reading sometime ago Michael Green's, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand

Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970) in which he points out that the early theologians were churchmen, and not only churchmen, but evangelists. This is not to say that they were all good theologians or that contemporary theologians must be the bishops or what have you of their denominations. It is only to point out the vital, intrinsic connection between theology and the church in the era of the rapid spread of Christianity. Despite the fact that the theological sciences have advanced and the vast amount of information requires technical specialization as in other areas of knowledge, theology cannot afford to become a sort of esoteric endeavor done only for the initiated. It is germane to have theological societies, but unless they operate consciously as servants of the church little value is forthcoming. One is reminded somewhat facetiously of the "fat ghost with the cultured voice" as C. S. Lewis describes him in his work *The Great Divorce*. Upon refusing to repent of his snobbish spirit of open-ended intellectual inquiry and enter the heavenly solid city he cuts off the conversation with his host to return to the grey city by saying, "Bless my soul, I'd nearly forgotten. Of course I can't come with you. I have to be back next Friday to read a paper. We have a little Theological Society down there."

The responsibility of making theology pertinent to the church rests both upon the theologian and the church. It is not our purpose in this paper to discuss the situations in the church which may be hindering stimulation in theological interest. We would only submit that the radical separation of clergy and laity with its attending circumstance in many churches of the authoritative clerical interpretation in theological matters does little to encourage private study. Our concern here, however, is with the nature of theology done by the theologian for the church. In this respect we would like to suggest three imperatives which surely come to you by way of reminder, but nevertheless require renewed implementation today.

1. Theology must be understandable to the church. In a broadside attack which cannot be denied as totally off target, Robert Brow in his book, *The Church: An Organic Picture of Its Life* writes, "For the church at large we have few specialists who can teach through the mass media. Books of Christian doctrine are produced and apparently bought, but one wonders how many of these are readable, let alone stimulating. Our best brains are siphoned off to seminaries where they are expected to write indigestible monographs for the half dozen other men in the world who can understand what they are talking about. In the past doctors of the church wrote so that literate men could understand, and Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley are much easier to read than our contemporaries. When C. S. Lewis writes theology in his spare time and millions are fed by his books, our theologians still assume that he is shallow because he lacks footnotes, bibliographies, and thesis style. . . . The greatest battle is the battle of the mind, and it is won by words that are shot like bullets—smooth, sharp, powerful, and dead on target" (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968, p. 71).

It is well to remind ourselves that the gospel was written for all men. Even the erudite mind of the great Apostle Paul expressed his theological thoughts in words intended for the church to understand. There are no more profound writings in all the world than those of the Apostle John with their disclosures of God, man, and the world. Yet they ordinarily become the starting point of Greek language studies because of their plain words. In his introduction to Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, McNeill remarks that Calvin frequently commended the biblical writers for their clarity, simplicity, and brevity and sought to emulate them in his own writings. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960, p. lxx). It is not in the use of long technical words that theology produces its impact, but in words which allow the illuminating Spirit of God to most clearly impress the truth upon the mind.

The recent trip to the moon has reminded us that a particular field has a vocabulary all of its own. But while other sciences may afford the luxury of their own special verbal symbols, theology cannot. It makes little difference if we understand what ground control says to the astronauts, most of us have no plans to go to the moon. But if theological thought is significant to the Christian way, all believers must understand for all are travelling together. It may be scientific to say:

Scintillate, scintillate, globule vivific,  
Fain would I fathom thy nature specific,  
Loftily poised in the ether capacious,  
Strongly resembling a gem carbonaceous.

But it is more communicative to state,

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,  
How I wonder what you are,  
Up above the world so high,  
Like a diamond in the sky.

To be sure scholarly theological dialogue has value and will not be understood by all. But whatever value it has is in vain unless somehow it is translated into communication for the common man. May it never be said of evangelical theology as Abraham Kuyper says of the 18th Century theology, that in its impotence it "sought strength in sesquipedalian words and lofty terms. . ." (*Principles of Sacred Theology*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963, p. 671).

2. Secondly, theology must be relevant to the church. Lord Eccles, in his book *Half Way to Faith* points the finger at theological writers when he says, "The laity, although better informed on almost everything else, has never been so ignorant about the ground-plan of the New Testament; this is partly your fault because you have concentrated your scholarships in fields too narrow to be widely interesting; will you now turn your attention to the gospel as a whole? To its relevance as a whole to the age in which we live?" (Cited by Michael Green *Man Alive*, Downers Grove, Ill., IVF, 1967, p. 3).

The various specialized disciplines of theological science are indispensable to an accurate wholeness of truth. Without the scholarship of experts in philology, philosophy, archeology, history, and other related fields, theological study would be seriously impoverished. But if these specializations are pursued for themselves, and not molded into a unified view of truth, they are lost in the satisfaction of scholarly achievement. As in medicine, so in theology there is an increasing need for the general practitioner who can build the parts into a meaningful life system.

It is not our intention to impugn or subvert the validity of those disciplines which are performed on the base of natural empirical studies common to all investigators. But as Abraham Kuyper correctly pointed out these studies do not finally touch the higher function of theology. They do not set before the church and the world a system of truth which depends upon the regenerated illumined mind and exposes the radical difference between Christianity and the philosophies of the world.

The great commission of the Lord commanded the church to make disciples of all peoples. This entails evangelism and instruction in the Christian life. These must be the overriding concerns of theology. It must be remembered that the documents of the New Testament were writings of a missionary church, and it is to the credit of the sub-apostolic leaders that their thinking was also evangelistically oriented. In the words of Michael Green, "the content of their proclamation was none other than the person of Christ. They made use of all the cultural and intellectual pathways which would facilitate the reception of this message... their aim... remained both simple and direct, to introduce others to Jesus Christ" (*Evangelism in the Early Church*, Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970, p. 276).

In many areas the church is on the move today and unless theology can aid in the cause it will simply be ignored. The noted Scotch Theologian, James Denney, once said, "I haven't the faintest interest in theology which does not help us to evangelize." One can hardly fault those who take the same position today.

Too often theological effort is used to argue with unbelieving wisdom rather than point men to Christ. The intellectual climate of the day is significant for any evangelistic theology but a constant concern with the latest philosophies leaves little energy for a positive offensive and also may appear like war on Mars to most people. Evangelical theologians together with evangelical scholars in all disciplines must become more creative in constructing a system of truth which genuinely confronts the world in meaningful terms where people live. If we believe that the truth conforms to reality we must begin to find new ways of demonstrating it. These demonstrations may at times conflict with the vanguard of intellectual thought on the historical mood, but if they are worked out from the fundamental biblical principles of the nature of man as an individual and social being they will be relevant.

We have been led to believe that man has come of age. We are told that we must now deal with secular man who no longer believes in God; he only believes what can be empirically verified, all else is meaningless. Theologians have been busy constructing a theology either conforming to this man or attempting to convert him. But sociologist Peter Berger tells us in his insightful little book, *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969, pp. 24-25) that this man is not so prevalent after all. A study of American students revealed that 80 per cent expressed a "need for religious faith," and in Germany 68 per cent said they believed in God while 86 per cent admitted to praying. Would it not be more advisable to accept the teaching of the Word on the religious heart of men and approach them with the thought of Paul at Athens? Although not suggesting an evangelical theology, Berger presents other human propensities such as order and hope which could possibly become inductive starting points for a contemporary evangelistic theology based upon the biblical understanding of human existence.

Turning to the realm of Christian instruction a theology for the church cannot be content with setting forth and defending faith in the great acts of salvation. It must be fleshed out in terms of the dynamics of life. Epistemological issues are foundational and therefore imperative, but people are more often concerned with the reality of faith in experience. Walking in the power of the Spirit, dealing with personal attitudes and interpersonal relationships, these are issues touching men and women in every strata of life. Bernard Ramm in an article on interpersonal theology in the recent issue of *Eternity* (December, 1972, p. 22) states that the most influential force moving pastors to this type of theology is the experience of the failure of simply preaching and teaching about God's great transactions for man and in man. Ramm notes that "enjoying the benefits of the great divine transactions did not do enough for people in handling the problems of their lives and the quality of interpersonal relationships." Without leaving the objective realities of the truth, theology must increasingly elaborate their functional implementation in life. People want theology to interpret actual living and give guidance about it. Without this they lose interest.

A further imperative of theology in its instructive purpose for the church demands that it transcend the confines of "spirituality" and speak to all of life. Barthian neo-orthodoxy proved to be unstable, at least partially because it isolated the religious element of man from the remainder of his mind. It accepted the Kantian dualism of faith and science and refused to bring all of human thought into captivity to Christ. While acknowledging a cosmic dimension of Christ, evangelical theology may also be charged with fostering an epistemological dualism in the church by default. A theology which purports to provide the rationale for all existence, but does not speak to the affairs in which men spend most of their life can hardly be expected to be motivational.

A factor in the success of the early church according to Green was that "their Christ was no ecclesiastical figure, interested only in men's souls. He was the cosmic Christ, the author, sustainer, and final goal of the

universe...truth was a unity, and it derived from the ultimate reality made personal in him who was Way, Truth, and Life. It was this conviction which nerved them to proclaim the Absolute in a world which was dominated by the Relative in its morals, religion, and concept of history." (Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, p. 277).

This same theology of universal dimensions is desperately needed both for church life and evangelism. There is an interrelation between the knowledge of God and ourselves. Theology therefore must seek to relate to all areas of human endeavor. The task is immense. No one today would dare to say with Justin, "I have endeavored to learn all doctrines..." It can only be done with the cooperation of evangelical scholarship in all fields. The fact that it has not been done adequately still lies in our opinion with the problems pointed out long ago by Abraham Kuyper. Theologians have concentrated almost exclusively on the conflicts between theology and the secular studies while the Christian scholars in these fields have for the most part operated dualistically, being secular with the head and sacred with the heart. Real advance, Kuyper notes, will only come when Christians with heart and mind united under the power of regeneration devote all their powers of thought to these natural and historical studies (Kuyper, p. 608). If theology is to be increasingly meaningful both in the church and out, evangelical theologians must enlist their colleagues in the so-called secular fields and get on with this task.

3. Thirdly, and finally, doing theology for the church requires not only that it be understandable to the ordinary literate person and concerned with the issues of his life, but it must be a confessional theology. By the term confessional at this point we do not refer to theology of a creedal nature but to a theology impregnated with the life commitment of the theologian. The author of a recent book gave the following explanation for its writing. He says, "I have spent my entire life as a teacher and a student of Christian theology and have written many books about the subject; now, as I approach my seventieth year, I feel an urgent desire to communicate to the ordinary man or woman, not the professional scholar, what means most to me—not because I have any confidence that I am always right about everything, but because I am sure that people who, like me, are trying to be disciples of Jesus Christ, can be helped when someone a little older tells them what has come to be central in his own life and experience."

Theology, all will agree, aims at nothing short of the transformation of life. But unless it is done in a manner which conveys a genuine experiential dimension, it fails of its goal. The theology which captures the minds of men has always been that which springs from the heart engaged with the practical needs of a living faith. It has been said of Calvin that "in the midst, as at the outset of his work, it was the practical preoccupations of living faith which guided him, and never a desire for pure speculation." Theology by its very nature cannot be done as other studies simply for the sake of truth. It cannot rest with the ideas of God and man, sin and



salvation. While it deals in I-It relationships to use Buber's expressions, it urges the participant on to the I-Thou. Unless theology is done with the testimony of the latter relationship it is unlikely to engender it in its hearers. The note of personal involvement is constantly struck in the New Testament writings and to cite Green again, it pervaded the works of the early Christians. "Even the most academic of them were convinced that they found the truth in Christ, and were not embarrassed to add their personal testimony to the message they delivered" (Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, p. 206).

In this connection the statement of Donald Bloesch concerning the relative dearth of devotional writings in the new evangelicalism and the need of such works for an impact on the modern church is pertinent to all ("The New Evangelicalism," *Religion in Life*, 41:335-36, Autumn, 1972). Doing theology for the church requires that it be done in the presence of God. The mind must be committed to the laborious task of making the revelation of God a part of a unified world view of conscious thought, and the heart must be surrendered to the experience of it.

Church renewal involves many facets, not the least of which is a renewed love of God with the mind. The challenge lies before us to exercise our spiritual service as a part of the church for the edification of all.