

The Theological Task

HEROLD D. WEISS

13

Most things in life — and it is comfortable to recognize this — are understood by all to be legitimate, useful, indispensable. Their place in society is well assured. Cultural instruments usually belong in this category. There may be some of them, however, that are considered legitimate and even useful (if useful is given a rather broad connotation) but that would not be considered indispensable.

Professional roles may fare quite differently when thus evaluated. Today no one questions the legitimacy, usefulness, and indispensability of the medical profession. But some years ago there was a feeling that law was definitely not a legitimate profession for a Seventh-day Adventist. I think that today probably many would question the legitimacy of a Seventh-day Adventist's being a ballet dancer. And part of the reason would be that ballet dancing is not considered to be indispensable, nor primarily useful, to the proclamation of the advent message.

It is no secret that on more than one occasion theologians have been considered quite dispensable, useless, and embarrassingly illegitimate children of the church. A theologian may perform as a servant, a prophet, a guru, or a demagogue, and accordingly he may be considered the pride and joy of a medieval prince (or of his university), public enemy number one, or simply an innocent charlatan. Still, theology once was considered the queen of the sciences, and today it seems to be regaining stature. Moreover, theologians have left their impact on the cultural heritage of Christianity.

But the presence of the theologian in the church has not always been welcome. Complaints about him are not unusual from those not versed in theology. Their understanding is that Christianity is essentially simple and

that the theologian is the one who comes in to disturb their quiet picture of things. The theologian is suspect because he introduces complicated clarifications and fine distinctions that in reality are only distracting and that sometimes even detract from the purity of the gospel. At times those poorly introduced to theology make a pun on the name of a famous theologian and classify all theologians as "veil makers" (Schleiermacher).

Thus the theologian has been looked on as one who declares things to be gray. He lacks conviction. He is caught in the study of ancient history and languages. He delights in complicated arguments. But one does not need history and languages and arguments to grasp Christ and hold him dear unto salvation. As a result, the theologian is considered a hindrance rather than a help for faith. By wishing to question every affirmation from every conceivable perspective, the theologian is in fact undoing the work of the Holy Spirit. He raises questions, and human questionings only lead to doubt. Thus the legitimacy, usefulness, and indispensability of theology are seriously doubted.

But if this matter is to be considered openly, one soon discovers that everyone who has faith also has a theology. To the believer the question is not whether or not to have a theology. If he believes, he has given to his faith some verbal explication, in one way or another. He has integrated his faith with the rest of his life. He sees himself and speaks about himself in terms of his faith. One may question whether the believer is fully aware of the implications of his theology or whether he is aware that in actuality he has one. But there is no question that he has one.

There is real danger, therefore, that a theology adopted uncritically and operating in life without its user's awareness may not reflect true Christianity. A particular believer's situation in life may introduce into his theology elements that are contrary to Christianity, or at least foreign to it. Theology is the possession of all believers, but not all believers exercise their critical judgment to make sure that what they believe is what the church teaches.

This much should serve to point out that theology is not the private possession of an eclectic group to whom the mysteries of God have been revealed. Theologians are not Gnostics: fortunate ones who through knowledge have acquired possession and dominion over the keys of the kingdom. Theology may have an appeal to the intellectual dilettante who, like a butterfly, wishes to taste the delicacies of every flower. The intellectually curious who may wish to feel at home within the inner theological circle may indeed find in theology a delicious intellectual exercise. But in reality, the-

ology is not an academic exercise which people with the right intellectual disposition may find worthwhile.

I

What is theology?

Probably the simplest way to define theology would be to compare it with religion. Religion, in a word, is *experience*. Religion is what we have. Religion is what moves us. Religion is action, feeling, ritual. Religion is the exercise of faith. Religion is a way of life.

Theology, on the other hand, is *words*. Theology is not what we have but what we say about what we have. Theology is what we want others to know about our experience. It is one thing to feel something; to verbalize our feelings is another thing. Theology is a way of talking.

15

The classic definition is that given by Anselm. Theology is faith seeking understanding. Faith may exist without ever inquiring about itself. Faith may exist without ever drawing out the implications of its outlook in a particular world of thought. Faith may exist without ever considering the change it has produced in a life and what are the implications of this change in all the departments of life. Theology, then, is an attempt to clarify the revelation of God as this has become known in the experience of the believer. But the clarification of the experience ought to be in language that is not only meaningful to the believer but open to the believer's contemporaries.

The believer cannot escape the world he lives in because he has faith. He cannot negate it either. Therefore when faith begins to express itself in words, these words must make sense not only in the context of faith but also in the world of unfaith. Theology may choose to speak in terms which those who have faith understand, because they have first-hand knowledge of what theology talks about as a basic experience of the believing community. A theologian may choose to explain what are the implications, rewards, responsibilities, and privileges of belonging to the community of faith to those who are already members of the community. Or he may choose to speak more directly to those who do not belong to the community of faith. Whatever choice he makes, however, the theologian cannot overlook the fact that the church is in the world, and that basically it is when he is doing his work for the church, when he is seeking to understand himself as a member of the believing community, that he is presenting the faith to unbelievers.

The theologian is not one who looks over the world to calculate how

much of the faith the world will be willing or able to swallow, and who then reaches inside the gospel in order to bring out just however much the world will take. Rather, the theologian is one who lives in the church that is in the world. He lives among men, and in that context he seeks to understand the faith of the church which he also confesses. It is reported that William Temple of Oxford once remarked that a theologian does not ask himself, "How much will Jones swallow?" Instead the theologian says, "I am Jones, and I want to eat."¹

The selection of a language by a theologian determines considerably the nature of his audience. The intellectual and the cultural framework within which a theologian chooses to give expression to the faith of the church mark the limits of his influence. Thus a theologian sees himself performing a task for a particular audience. He is not only a child of his age who needs to understand the faith in terms of the age, but he is also a child of a particular segment of his age. Two very influential theologians of this century may serve as examples of this fact.

II

Karl Barth, in a biographical note in the preface of his groundbreaking work, *The Epistles to the Romans*, gives a candid insight into the motivation behind his decision to become a theologian.² As a pastor he was required every week to speak from the pulpit to a congregation that had just experienced World War I. To these people he was supposed to explain the faith and to show them how their faith provided them with strength for their everyday living. But at the university Barth had been told by his professors that one understood the faith when one had understood its history. The starting point for an understanding of the faith was to stand in "awe in the presence of history." This starting point was no longer meaningful. To be able to place the events faith confesses within a solid historical framework did not mean to Barth that he had grasped the significance of the events. After all, history is a human enterprise; only men write history.

That awe in the presence of history that his teachers instilled in the young Barth he now began to see as "historicism" or "positivistic history." Thus, finding that an appeal to manmade history could not give the faith a true foundation, Barth searched for another. He found it meaningful, and his meaning found a responsive chord in a generation of believers, to stand in awe not in the presence of history but rather in the presence of the word of God. This word is not the word that history authenticates, but the word that is authenticated by the Holy Spirit.

From that starting point his new theology of the word moved on to explain the faith in terms of the transcendence of God. This new approach to the faith had a power of its own to those who had been bound by history to the processes within the world. But it must be said that Barth did not come to this approach by examining his contemporaries. Rather, as a believer and as a man living after World War I, he saw in this approach more justice being done to the nature of the faith. Moreover, Barth spoke primarily to those who were already within the church, who had firsthand experience of the power of the transcendent word. In part, this approach was also determined by Barth's choice of a language. He chose to use the biblical vocabulary already well known by church members. But when used by him, the well-worn words of the Bible carried new meanings. As a result, Barth communicated most effectively to those who have penetrated the biblical terminology adopted by Barth for his own purposes.

Consider, now, Rudolf Bultmann. At the beginning of his career, Bultmann was attracted by Barth's new way of doing theology, but soon afterward he found it necessary to make clear his own understanding of the faith. It has been a rather common misunderstanding of Bultmann to suggest that he examined his contemporaries and decided to make the gospel palatable for them and that, therefore, his "demythologizing" theology is a way of taking away from the gospel the supernaturalism that leaves a bad taste in modern mouths. But even Barth, who on several counts disagreed quite thoroughly with Bultmann, recognized that Bultmann is not an apologist trying to make the gospel acceptable to modern man.³

In terms of the anecdote from Temple, he is not asking himself, "Let me see how much modern man is willing to swallow." Rather, he is really saying, "I am modern man, and I believe. Now let me tell you how I relate my faith to my modernity." In order to carry on this task of relating his faith to his modernity, Bultmann had to make two decisions. One was of the language to be used; the other was of the starting point for theology. On the first issue Bultmann chose what he considered the best language for this purpose — that is, the language of Heidegger's existentialist philosophy. He believed that this language deals with the same issues dealt with in the Bible, and that it does not have some of the drawbacks that biblical language now has because of the difference between biblical and modern conceptions of the world. So he used existentialist language to bring biblical faith to the modern world.

Bultmann chose as a starting point the hiddenness of the human self — again, not because of a concern for relevancy (even though in the process

he became relevant to man), but because of what he considered basic for a true understanding of the faith. He insisted that God must never be thought of as an object. God is only a subject; and when man thinks of God as if God were an object, he is destroying that which allows God to be God. But theology wishes to speak about God. The only way to do it, Bultmann affirmed, is by speaking about myself, since I too am a subject.⁴ When speaking about human existence, by analogy one is speaking about God, because there is a hiddenness about God that is analogous to the hiddenness of the human self. For operating in this way Bultmann has been charged with reducing theology to anthropology.

It is not our purpose here to judge the merits of the case, but only to point out how a theologian goes about his task. Bultmann launched his theological program not out of a desire to accommodate modern man but as an attempt to understand his faith as a Christian *and* as a modern man. Because he took his modernity more seriously than Barth did, and because he spoke in a language understood by more people outside the Christian fold, there is reason to think that Bultmann may have exercised a more pervasive influence in the general temper of our times.

III

These illustrations should suffice to demonstrate why modern theology is painfully aware of the dialectical or paradoxical relation between the revelation of God and the "forms" which that revelation takes within different cultures. The content of theology is religion, the experience of the living God who breaks through to human consciousness. But the expression given to that religious experience, the form assumed for its expression, the theological language used to verbalize and to preserve and transmit that religion, so that others may experience it and be able to identify the genuineness of their own experience, is subject to change, is subject to evaluation as to its adequacy. In this sense the Bible is *a* theology. It is the verbalization of the experience of the living God: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, the expression of the faith given in the Bible is considered normative, because that was indeed its original expression and because it was in this form that the battle against false gods was fought and won.

To illustrate in very simple terms what I mean, let me say that we in a Western cultural background, well aware of biblical images, speak rather blandly of the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. I am told, however, that in New Guinea that form of revelation is meaningless; there-

fore, Christians speak there of the pig of God that takes away the sin of the world. We may argue, because of our own cultural bias, whether the form "pig" does really contain the same theological content as the form "lamb." The discussion will soon make clear that theology is an attempt at culture translation; it is an attempt to take the faith and make it live in the culture where the believer lives.

In this sense the God-is-dead theologians are involved in a legitimate task: that is, to translate the gospel to a culture in which God is actually dead. We may wonder whether Christians should live in such a culture. We may wonder whether the gospel is translatable into that language. We may wonder whether the translation is adequate or not. But in principle we must admit the legitimacy of the task, just as we admit the legitimacy of translating the New Testament into the language of the Auca Indians of Ecuador.

There have been those who have tried to bind theology to one theological mold, insisting that the task of theology is not to translate into another cultural language but rather to retain the eternal verities in their pristine purity by recovering the real meaning of the original language. But modern theology is insistent on the fact that to establish the meaning of the original language is not equal to establishing the thought patterns of God. For a time it was believed that if one could just peel away the Greek mold which theology got into during the second through the fifth centuries of our era, and one could recover the original Hebraic modes of thought, in recovering the Hebraic mentality one was taking hold of the thought of God.

But modern theology takes seriously the words of Isaiah 55:9: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." Modern theology takes seriously the words of Ecclesiastes 5:2: "God is in heaven and you upon earth; therefore, let your words be few." Modern theology has experienced the frustration reflected in the rhetorical question of Ecclesiastes 7:24: "That which is, is far off and deep, very deep; who can find it out?"

Within the limitations of human understanding and of cultural situations, it must be accepted that, in fact, at times Hebraic modes of thought did not serve well the faith that it was seeking to understand. The mentality of the Hebrews centuries before the Christian era was not given to closely secured definitions, and the mentality of first-century Christians, formed as it was by Old Testament patterns, did not sense the necessity for them either. But as Christianity moved out into a more hellenized world, it had to adapt itself to, and express itself in this new cultural mold. For example, the relationships of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit with each other

within the pages of the Bible remain rather loosely defined. Greek theology did a great service to Christianity, therefore, by providing the faith with a more defined understanding of what it means to believe in One God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Today some are finding the orthodox concept of the Trinity meaningless, because it was couched in terms of static essences, substances, and natures. But this does not take away the fact that when the faith needed to understand what it meant when it confessed God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Greek theology had to do the job, and it did it well enough to win the battles against polytheism while maintaining the divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

One may legitimately ask whether in its attempt at verbalization, in its attempt at definitions, theology does not run the risk of distorting and in some cases even negating the faith. Could it not have been the case that the Council of Chalcedon ended up giving to the church a concept of the Trinity which is not true? Indeed, it could have been the case. But the church has continued to find that particular expression of her experience of God satisfying, even if somewhat complicated. To understand the faith in every age and in every culture, as indeed it must be understood, does imply taking a risk.

To do theology is to run a risk. As my colleague E. W. H. Vick has put it: "Whenever we put our brain into theological gear or open our homiletic mouths, we are taking a risk."⁵ Men talking theologically have said any amount of nonsense. They have defended their cause in war. They have defended slavery. They have argued that the universe is geocentric. They have imposed on the Bible scientific authority. They have banned blood transfusions. They have proclaimed the cross of Christ as a demonstration of God's wrath. They have proclaimed the uninterrupted progress of the human race. They have claimed chronological knowledge of the future. They have confused the American way of life with life in Christ. But precisely because this is the result of some theology, it is necessary that theology be done, so that those things which belong to the faith may be clearly set forth and those things which have come in through the back door may be openly exposed.

In doing this, theology runs a second type of risk. To do theology may mean having to ask people who have uncritically adopted some position as an expression of Christianity to abandon it because it does not belong to

the faith. Asking people to give up cherished misconceptions is risky indeed. Taking a hard, critical look at one's faith in order to understand it may let things come to light that do not belong there. But things which have been kept for some time acquire sentimental value. It can be discomfoting, therefore, to realize that some concepts that have been cherished do not stand the test of critical questioning by an enlightened theology.

In matters theological, people at times "like to think" in one way or another. But when confronted with the facts of the case, one may have to give up what one "likes to think" because it does not belong to the particular framework within which his faith lives. Just as taking a termite inspector to look at a house involves the risk of being told that some pillars supporting the house need to be replaced, so also doing theology involves the risk concomitant to all serious questioning. But the theologian must face his task and run the risk of questioning again what it is that faith means.

In the performance of this task the theologian serves himself of the methodology and the cultural symbols developed by the philosopher. But he is not a philosopher. He is a theologian. Paul Tillich, who probably more than anyone else in this century tried to bring together philosophy and theology by showing their "profound interdependence," insisted on distinguishing the basic postures of the philosopher and the theologian. The theologian keeps his doubts in tension in the face of his basic certainty. The philosopher keeps his certainties in tension in the face of his basic doubt. Tillich stated it in this formula: "The philosopher has not and has; the believer has and has not."⁶

The philosopher has radical doubts and goes out looking for certainties. The believer has radical certainties and goes out to face the world of doubt. To quote Tillich again: "Faith says 'Yes' in spite of the anxiety of 'No.' It does not remove the 'No' of doubt and the anxiety of doubt; it does not build a castle of doubt-free security — only a neurotically distorted faith does that — but it takes the 'No' of doubt and the anxiety of insecurity into itself. Faith embraces itself and the doubt about itself."⁷

If faith were to stand in a vacuum, no one would be impressed. No one in this age of space exploration needs to be told that objects left in a vacuum stand by themselves. Faith must stand in the face of doubt.

We return to our original question: Is theology necessary? Is it useful? Is it indispensable? Must the theologian continue at his task, or should his work better be left undone?

Indeed, theology is all these three things, and the theologian must keep on at his task. This is so because faith must assert itself over against unbelief, because the church must be sure of the purity of her faith, because those who belong to the community of faith must have a means by which to evaluate their own religious experience, and because those who do not have faith must know what faith means to those who have it.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 Reported by A. M. Ramsey, *From Gore to Temple; the Development of Anglican Theology Between Lux Mundi and the Second World War, 1889-1939* (London: Longmans, 1961), p. 7. Quoted by E. W. H. Vick, *Theological Essays* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: The Theological Seminary, 1965), p. 3.
- 2 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (translated from the sixth edition by Edwin C. Haskyns. London: Oxford University Press, 1957).
- 3 Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1958).
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- 5 Vick, p. 4.
- 6 Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: Phoenix Books, 1955), p. 62.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 61.