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THEOLOGY AND CHURCH-LIFE

I

THESE two are often referred to as adversaries or, in a better case, as factors standing side by side of each other. They can become adversaries when Theology is considered as "theory", Church-life as "practice" and these, theory and practice, the first of which being according to Goethe: grey the other green, as the golden tree of life, are in this sense always opposites. In the history of Theology we know currents which simply laid aside the questions of Church-life as not worth while to deal with, or looked on Theology as a science which looks on the questions of practical life from a point of high scientific pride and with the opinion that the best Theology can do with these questions is to draw them under a criticism from which there would be no appeal. Theology often thought it too lowly a task for itself to deal with the problems of the life of the Church except with precepts and directions. The reason of this conviction, from the side of Theology, was its claim to belong to the sciences and its effort to be recognized as a science in the sense as other sciences are recognized. It accordingly tried to build up its system with the aid of other sciences on the foundation of History, Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology and others. In its effort Theology ceased to be properly itself and gave up also its connection with the Church.

On the other side the consequence of this was that in the measure that Theology separated itself from Church-life and made itself independent of it, seeking a foreign soil for its existence and work, Church-life separated itself from Theology and tried to constitute its own work and laws and regulations. In some of the churches there was a kind of proverb when comparing and contrasting themselves with the Theological life of other countries which ran: in this country or church scientific Theology is more emphasized, in ours practical Church-life. In this statement there was doubtless a truth, but there was a mistake, too. It was true that some currents

and systems of Theology did not care much for the real questions of the life of the Church and so it easily happened that these systems were separated from the Church itself and became useless and worthless for the Church; and, on the other hand, there were churches which did not deal much with Theology and for these scientific Theology seemed scientific Theology—a useless and worthless entertainment. But beyond this historical truth there is in this statement a sad mistake because Theology which tries to build up its system on the foundation of other sciences and forgets its own sure ground, the Word of God, is not Theology; and Theology which does not try to look at the questions of Church-life in their scientific connections but only in their temporal appearances and everyday relations, is not science.

The complaint that Theology separated itself from real life, that theory and practice became adversaries not to be reconciled to each other, that the students of Theology—as already Schleiermacher observed—had the most knowledge of this science when they left the College; the complaint, that Theology is unable to give the necessary preparation for pastoral practice, it gives only theories which cannot be used in the Church-life, and in spite of his theological training the minister has to find himself his way in the work:—these were all due to the fact that Theology was unable to be truly Theology and Church-life was not truly the life of the Church. Theology, intending to be a science in the sense of other sciences, lost just that feature which alone is able to lift it above every other theory and make it independent in its scientific subject and method as a science not of human theories but that of the Word of God. This conception of Theology basing its subject and method on a human theory, necessarily separated it from the life of the Church of which the true basis is the preaching of the Word.

Church-life, on the other hand, intending to be the life of a social group and trying to be counted among other social systems, lost just that feature which alone is able to lift it above every other human organization and make it independent in itself as the life of the elect of God. This conception of the Church, basing its existence on human organizations, necessarily separated it from Theology of which the only subject can be the Word of God. So the cleft between scientific Theology and Church-life continually deepened and consequently, Church-

life became often a mere technique of a human organization, and Theology became a theory built up on a foundation of human suppositions.

This difficulty can be felt in many churches nowadays. Whenever we meet this, it always shows that there is something wrong either in Theology or in the life of the Church. It is an important question for many churches and many theologies, what is the right relation between these two: what can Theology give for Church-life and what service can the latter render for Theology?

II

When speaking about the relation between Theology and Church-life, first of all it is to be fixed that these two must not be separated from each other. Their relation is not that of strangers, or independent and indifferent parties, but of those of which neither can live alone. In being separated the one from the other each of them is risking its existence. So the relation between them is a question of existence for both. The point where they are and they must be connected with one another we find in the foundation of both and this foundation is the Word of God. Theology cannot be other than the study of the Word of God, the preaching of which is the only task of the Church. All the difficulties and controversies came from the fact that either Theology or Church-life separated itself from this Word.

When we ask: what can Theology do for Church-life, this question goes back to the common duty of both: the serving of the Word of God. This is what the Church has to do. Its whole work must be this task, and no part of its work can be without this. Church-life means not an independent, autonomous life of the Church as a social group, but the life of the Gospel in the souls of the Church-members and in the works and institutions of the same. The divine services in or outside of the Church-building, religious education and instruction of the children, work among the young and the grown-up people, literature, even the financial and administrative life of the Church cannot serve any other aim than that of preaching the Word, or to find, to prepare, to render appropriate the means and circumstances for this preaching. This is the view-point from which the whole life of the Church must be considered, conducted, and any other aspect and tendency beyond this

removes the Church from its unique and ever sure foundation, yes, destroys it.

But the Church is often apt to set itself loose from this foundation and to leave it. If the Word of God were something easily understood by the human mind, which could be perfectly expressed and contained in words, letters and sentences of a book or text, identified with human thoughts and opinions, this danger could be avoided. In this case it would stand as a barrier before the Church beyond which it could not step. It could be expressed and summed up in a book, in decisions of a Church-board, or in some kind of theories. This is the case according to the conception of the Roman Church which leaves no place for doubt about what is the will of God expressed in the infallible statements of the highest authority of the Church. The Roman conception considers the Word as something which is humanly knowable and understandable without the smallest doubt. This petrification of the Word of God in human thoughts and statements our Reformed Theology is unable to accept without giving up its main principle: the absolute sovereignty of God. So it is not a sure, doubt-free and quiet thing for the Church to speak about the Word and to preach it. The Church is not able to possess the Word, it can not be the Church's property as if it was given to it to have it and to rule over it. It is the Word of God and not the Word of the Church. In understanding and preaching it the Church is in jeopardy of doubts and insecurities, often it is unable to find the real Word in the heap of human explanations and is in the danger of mistaking it for such. The Church has always to be ready, as the Fathers who prepared the II Helvetic Confession, to accept with gratitude the view of those who teach better from the Word of God. This means that it is an important duty of the Church to fight and to strive continually for the Word, for its meaning, for its understanding, for the ability to give place to the Word in its life, to search what is the real claim of the Word on the work of the Church. This happens in the life of the Church not merely occasionally; it is an uninterrupted striving, an earnest request and desire to know the Will of God and to obey it. This work of the Church in which it strives humbly and frankly to put its life and work under the judgment, and under the Will of God which speaks in His Word, is Theology.

The first service, therefore which Theology should render to Church-life is to make the claim and the precept of the Word clear to the Church. It is a question of existence for it to preach the Word soundly and plainly. The Church is needing a criticism of its life and work, a criticism on the foundation of the Word. Without such a criticism the Church easily goes astray, mistakes the Word of God for human speech and human efforts; and so it leaves its foundation. Theology not only as an institution or as a science but as principle for sound explanation of the Word is able to give this criticism and as such is working continually in the Church. Leaders and members of the Church are doing this work of Theological criticism when they discuss questions of preaching, or the meaning of a passage in the Scriptures, or the right understanding of the Confession. Broadly speaking every article, every writing in which attempts are made to clear up the belief of the Church and the Scriptural basis of it, is a kind of Theological work. Further, the Church thus gets connected with cultural and economic life, and with the life of the State. Now in this respect it is an important duty of the leaders of the Church—not only of Theologians but of ministers of the smallest parish and members of the Church—to find the right relation in which the Church has to stand with these spheres of common life, because if they do not do this, it may easily happen that Church-life may be identified with the life of other communities, and the true message of the Church may be confounded with earthly and human thoughts. In speaking about this relation they can build up their case, and that of the Church too, on two points: they can try to understand this relation either from outward circumstances, say from the common interests of the Church and State, from the economic questions of the former and so on, which point of view leads the Church to become a mere worldly organization; or they can try to understand the connection between the life of Church and earthly conditions, on the basis of the Word and in this case they have to try the answer the Word gives to the Church, the right relation which the Word prescribes to the Church in this question. This work is truly a Theological work in which Theology renders service to Church-life, giving a help and an instruction in its fundamental question, by the sound explanation of the Word of God.

The Church is a community in which the Word is preached

as it is understood and confessed by the Church: that is, the Church is a community of confession. The members of the Church are those who confess their faith, and in doing this they witness to the Will of God as it is exhibited to them, according to the Confession, in the Scriptures. This witnessing takes place in a world where the faith of the Church is opposed by other, human sayings, where the purity of the Word is eclipsed by human thoughts. In this danger Theology is obliged to compare continually the Confession with the Word in order that the former may neither separate itself from the Word nor predominate over it. But the Confession is not only a fixed and written standard of the faith but also a continual expression of the same in words and deeds in the life of the Church. When we witness our faith in the Church we do this not only in the preaching of the Word, but also in answering the questions which stand before us in the faith of other churches, or opinions—questions about fasting, about the Sabbath, about spiritism and so on. These are questions which Theology has to make clear for the Church and Church-life. These questions arise in the everyday life of any member of the Church, and the members of the Church can be in uncertainty and doubt about them unless Theology is ready to answer them and enable the Church member to confess his faith. Many uncertainties in the souls of Church-members or even leaders, many doubts or opinions often contrary to the faith and Confession, and a dazzling of these in the Church, are due to the fact that the Church is not making sufficient use of the work of Theology but even sometimes considers it a superfluous and luxurious thing, and so Theology and Church-life are separated from each other—the Church living its own life regardless of having a Theology.

The Church in its life has its outward forms and frames, different and manifold in themselves, in which the life of the Church goes on from the work of the government and administration to its different means of spiritual work. None of these is without the duty to be a means of preaching and hearing and obeying the Word. These forms and frames show us the third section of Church-life, the first of them being, as we saw, the life of the Church as a community of saints in this world, the second the life of the Church in confessing the faith. The preaching of the Word and the obedience to it do not necessarily happen only in liturgical forms or in influencing the faith and

opinion of the Church members about questions with reference to other opinions, the preaching is going on also in leading the members of the Church in their conduct, in their manner of living, in deeds, in works of charity, in living together as members of the same Reformed Church—even in contributing to keep up the Church in its financial life. Obedience to the Word is expressed in these actions as well as in others. The works which the Church maintains and continues to follow are all parts of the life of the Church. These are all means and forms by which its members confess their faith with words and deeds and conduct obeying the preached Word of God.

The danger for the Church to be misled, the possibility to falsify the Word is greater here than in the cases already mentioned. It is much easier to see clearly the right place and duty of the Church as a community towards other communities (although there are sad cases of this kind in many countries of Europe just now), than to hold up and maintain the right opinion on questions of other view-points and human theories; and even this is much easier than to keep to the Word of God in the different works of the Church, where we can never defend ourselves sufficiently against introducing methods and procedures contrary to the Word of God. Cultural, economical, political training as aim of the work among the youth, national or financial or social interests as aims for Church-life, intellectual or moral education in children-work instead of Christian education, are real temptations with, or because of, which the sound and pure message of the Word is often neglected or mistaken.

It is necessary for all these forms, frames, methods and procedures of the life of the Church to be controlled by, and to be taken under the judgement of the Word explained in the Confession in order to avoid and to exclude everything which is contrary to it. Theology has here a duty to observe this part of the Church-life too, to examine it in the light of the Word and show what is the right way of preaching it and obeying it. In questions which are always raised in the constitution, government and administration of the Church, Theology has to point out how these must be settled according to the law of God. In the missionary work of the Church Theology has to examine the methods and ways to be followed not on the basis of human tendencies or practical reasons but on the basis of the Will of God.

This service of Theology for the life of the Church is therefore the work of a criticism, of which the foundation is the Word itself. Theology tries to make the Word's precepts predominating in the whole Church. More than this: to make the Word of God a real ruler in the life of the Church Theology cannot and ought not to do.

III

Let us now look at the other side of the question which is this: if we saw the service Theology is rendering to Church-life what can Church-life do for Theology? We already saw that these two are not only not independent of each other but even they cannot be separated, because both of them belong to the same Church as one of its essential features so that if Church-life is needing Theology, the latter is unable to do its work efficiently without Church-life, and neither of the services should assert predominance over the other.

Notwithstanding, it often happens that on the part of Church-life Theology is considered as a thing foreign and strange, a kind of superfluous work which is not essentially necessary for the Church. This happens mostly when the life of the Church loses its connection with the Word. In such case the life is looked at as mere technics and the practice of the Church's work as mere questions of procedure. The Church becomes a big machine in which the workmen have their own ways of work, know and fulfill their tasks; and in which the result and success of the work is secured by the practice and grip the workman is able to have. In such a Church Theology, in the real and deep sense of the word, is unnecessary, it is necessary only to know how the things can be done, how the doctrine of the Church can be taught, what are the practical hints for preparing and delivering a sermon. Such a Church is not a living community in which the Spirit of God is working continually through the sound and humble interpretation of the Word as understood by the work of theological study; it is only a society of people, harmless and peaceful, endeavouring to realize an ideal life or living together under some human principles for a good purpose. Such a church has no Theology and very often when Theology was not worthy of its name, when giving up the study of the true Word of God it dealt only with human opinions, principles

and systems, the fault was not its own but the Church's, whose life made Theology like itself: barren and dull. And as we saw that only a living and true Theology is able to render true service to the Church, we find the same experience here: only a living Church can have a living Theology. And as only a true Theology, bound to the Word of God, is able to serve the Church, so only a true Church, which preaches humbly and soundly the Word and which seeks its life in doing this, is able to serve Theology.

The Church is the territory, the battlefield where the good fight of faith is being fought. This is going on continuously and in it Christ Himself is leading His army with His Spirit and His Word. The Church is where the Word of God is sounding, where the Holy Spirit works, where Christ is at war with the old Enemy. This work of God is going on in the souls of the members of the Church, there it is sounding the holy call, there the Spirit is bringing forth its wonderful fruits, there the gifts of God are doing their work. In the life of the Church great forces are fighting against each other. So the Church is not a quiet company of happy and peaceful people. If in the Church there are not oppositions, difference of opinions, there is no struggle of experiences and view-points, where there is only a silent possession of holy values and contented enjoying of a higher life, without problems, discussions, struggles and victories, that is no Church, not an army of Christ fighting against sin and evil, it is only a lifeless company of a so-called religion where people are lying on the cushion of their assured salvation. There the cause of Christ is already lost during the time the warriors have been asleep in happy possession of their secured life and have not made themselves ready at every moment for the war. But in the true Church there is a spiritual war fought with spiritual weapons.

Even at present we see very clearly that the Church requires to be a place where the good fight must be fought. Even now we see that in the souls of the Church members in the whole life of the Church there is a crisis of thoughts, opinions, fighting against each other; problems difficult, painful and tormenting cutting into the life of the individual and of the Church which cannot be solved or even settled because they attack them in their very existence. This is the true life of the Church, a moving, stormy sea of doubts and questions.

If the Church ceases to take notice of this and tries to conceal it, it may live a quiet life but it ceases to be a Church.

And this is the first service Church-life is rendering to Theology: it shows it a territory, makes it possible to see the work of God as to how He leads this world. Without Church-life Theology could work only in a vacuum, and would become only a science for itself, or rather it would be obliged to cease. Church-life is where the problems Theology is dealing with become actual, life-questions which stand in the category of "hic et nunc", where Theology can see the will of God in its temporal and local actuality. If Theology loses sight of these problems it misses the real explanation of the Word, which is always God's clear and real call to human souls, to His elect in a special time and place. This time and place is the life of the Church, the point where and when the war of Christ for His Kingdom is led.

If the life of the Church ceases to be the preaching of the Word and the Church becomes a mere worldly organization, it can contribute nothing to Theology. Where there is no question arising about the true message of the Word, no war for the cause of God, where instead of this the Church stands in the service of human purposes: Theology becomes a science without any relation to Church-life. In many cases when the servants of the Church look on Theology as a superfluous effort, when students of Theology after finishing their curriculum do their best to get rid of every sign of a theological science, considering it as a mere "theory" in spite of which they think they need the "practice" of work: this is always a sign showing that the Church-life has lost its vitality, its real strength, because it lost its foundation: the connection with the Word. The responsibility of ministers and teachers, yes, even Church members towards the Word of God, the realisation that it is preaching and obeying this Word which only makes the Church-life real, and the efforts to get the true answer of God and the true message for the life of the Church is the source where strength and freshness of theological work can renew, because this goes back to the common foundation of both, to the living Word.

This actuality of the problems of Church-life presents itself not in a general situation, but in questions, claims and cases which arise in the life of the Church and in its connection with the world. The Church lives not an average life but stands

always in opposition to the world's spirit, stands always in a point of conflicts. This fact of collision cannot and may not be forgotten, nor denied, nor smoothed over. Sometimes it seems as if it were better for the Church to do so, and with keeping up a general and average terminology of its separatedness from the world to forget the points where this conflict becomes a serious fact in the life of its members. In this case it naturally happens that the contrast or even the difference between Church and world, between the demand of man and that of God, ceases and the members of the Church forget, that although they are in the world they are not of it. The Church with such agreements with the spirit of the world in fact betrays the will of God and leads in this betrayal its members too. The Church has to see that, in all the questions either of its own life or in the life of the outer world, the spirit of this world is contrary to the will of God not only in great questions, but also in personal and social life, duties and works of the individual Christian. So the life of the Church in this respect also is a continually moving one, where conflicts and difficulties are growing.

In this, Church-life gives to Theology a number of opportunities to give answers. For Theology it is a helpful opportunity that around it there is a life full of problems, with conflicts which do not allow its question to get into a state of rest, or self esteem, and to foster the hope that it is done with the problems of life. Newer questions in newer forms in newer connections are put before Theology to deal with them and to examine them in the light of the Word. For Theology it is the greatest danger to think that it knows everything, to be able to answer every question; and the greatest help for it is if it gets in contact with life and is there obliged to deal with them.

We saw what is the service and the claim of Church-life in relation to Theology. If these claims cease, Church-life dies. If this service ceases, Theology dies. Both of them stand under one and the same necessity: under the necessity of the Word. Theology has to warn that the Word may not be considered ever a human thought so that it may not be deprived of its absoluteness; Church-life has to be careful that the Word may not be ever thought a lifeless thing or an organization, so that it may not be deprived of the claim: that the Word is the Life which alone can give life both to Church and to Theology.