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Biblical Foundations: A South Asian Study

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Facing increasing pressures within an atmosphere of religious pluralism on the one hand, and forced subtly into a stand for social relevance on the other, the evangelical church in India stands urgently in need of critically evaluating its position. Current trends are steering theology either towards compromise solutions within all the religious and cultural demands of the country or towards arguable approaches where social action becomes the stress. Our task is to write a theology that will not only counteract such tendencies, but one that will stand on its own ground. And this theology will have to be one that faithfully holds together the two elements suggested in our title—Biblical theology and the Indian context.

However, it is imperative that we define our terms. First, what is theology? I must be honest and confess that I approach the term not as an academic but as one concerned for very down-to-earth practical outworkings of our faith. Theology thus to me refers to all of God's dealings with man in the widest sense. Yet, we need to be specific and state that we are talking about the *Biblical God*. To be clear, "theology" does not confine itself to the biblical God, as there can be Hindu or Islamic theologies. There could, however, not be an atheistic theology as that would be a contradiction! For this reason, we need to specify that we are talking about Biblical theology.

Further, this Biblical theology must be written in the Indian context. But what do we mean by the word "context"? I must hasten to point out my own discomfort over questionable attempts at "contextualization". Sincere as the purposes may have been, the results have not been very adequate. Hence, I use the word "context" advisedly in the widest sense to refer to not only the particular setting of the particular people, but also in reference to the peculiar way God may choose to confront that people. Our theology, then, needs to be written with a sensitivity to the context of each country, but also from the perspective of God's unique mission for that country.

But then, the question arises, can one really rewrite theology? The answer is in the affirmative, as long as we are clear that theology and the Bible are not synonymous. Theology depends upon the Bible, but the Bible does not depend upon theology. Thus while there may be a Korean theology, there cannot be a peculiarly Korean Bible, except in terms of a different language. However, despite varying theologies, the fact that we stress a Biblical theology ensures that there must be biblical truths universally valid, except that their outworkings may [p. 114](#) vary. The Christ exalted in America must be the same Christ exalted in Asia. The one sin—rebellion against God—is the same sin that separates all men from God.

It has become fashionable these days to talk separately of the Christology of Paul, the Christology of John etc. The varying elements are stressed rather than their unity. Simultaneously, there is a plea to go back to the teaching of Jesus rather than to get hung up on the teaching of Paul!

These no doubt make good academic pursuits but encourage the tendency to portray varying Christs for varying contexts. This is dangerous and must be avoided. All of the Christ who is relevant to Birmingham must be relevant to Bombay, or else we are formulating a chameleon-like Christ who changes colours according to the context. It has got to be the same Christ, making the same claims over all men wherever they are located.

By this we do not mean that the outworkings are also the same. The West may get convicted about its sin of materialism, the East about its religiosity.

But then, we are talking of context in terms far more than reference to geographical and cultural settings. We must also take in account God's dealings with that country and see how God wants to confront that particular people. So to contextualize the message we not only take into account the peculiarities of that particular people but sensitize ourselves to see how God wants to confront that people with his righteous demands. Perhaps another word needs to be used. I myself prefer to speak of "actualization", where the whole message becomes flesh in the messenger, making him communicate relevantly to his own situation. Nevertheless, theology must always be motivated from the condition of man on the one side, and from the concern of God on the other. Otherwise, we end up with a lifeless humanistic sociology, or else an irrelevant academic theology. The theology that Asia needs, and for that matter Africa or even America, is one that will burn with the passion of men involved with men, and not speculations of scholars surrounded by tomes and theoretical treatises.

One can hardly expect to even begin to write such a theology in this paper. And I will not even pretend to do so. But what we will be able to do is to call upon the kind of ingredients that will flavour such an undertaking. In other words, we ask ourselves what are the accents necessary to orchestrate a more relevant Indian Biblical theology. There are several, but four such accents are discussed below: [p. 115](#)

AN EMPHASIS ON GOD'S REVELATION

India is a country where millions are in a sincere search for God and his blessings. They are misled by the fallacy that this sincere search will ultimately lead them to the true God no matter by what name or in what form this God is now worshipped. Within this atmosphere the Christian is asked to be more accommodating, and with this desire, theories of the "hidden Christ in Hinduism" or that of the "anonymous Christian" have been encouraged.

Amid this pressure of religious permissiveness it is imperative that Indian Biblical theology accentuate the uniqueness of the Christian revelation and confront India with the uncompromising claims of Christ. Bishop Stephen Neill in a discussion of this whole problem¹ offers two suggestions amongst others. First, he suggests that "we must recognize afresh the immense originality of Jesus Christ. Under the influence of 'comparative religion' and similar tendencies we have been too much inclined to find parallels to the words of Jesus here, there and everywhere, and to suppose that he can be fitted into the category of prophet, or genius, or religious leader, or whatever we prefer. But this is simply wrong. Jesus cannot be understood in any other dimension other than his own. He has called into being a new world of reality, in which only those are at home who call him Lord. When Christians use the word 'God', they mean the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and nothing else. This is a truth that we forget at our peril."²

Neill goes on to strengthen this claim by stressing secondly that "we must not evade the inexorableness of Christ. We have tended to present to the world a tamed and amiable Christ, perhaps hoping thus to make him more attractive, but overlooking his own word that he came to bring not peace but a sword. His command 'Follow me' is unconditional, and its very indefiniteness makes it formidable. Neither path nor goal is indicated. But the

¹ Stephen Neill, *Salvation Tomorrow* (Lutterworth Press 1976)

² *ibid.* p.148.

world that crucified Jesus Christ has not so much changed that it is likely ever to be a comfortable home for the disciple.”³

The point is quite strongly stated, but Indian Biblical theology must be just as strong in order to be able to effectively confront other Indian theologies with the uniqueness of the Christian revelation and the inexorable claims of Christ upon the country. A useful ingredient for such a confrontation has been brought to our notice through p. 116 recent missiological discussions over the role of elenctics. The word “elenctics” finds its root in the Greek verb *elengchein*, which means to rebuke, to convict, to refute, to expose sin.⁴ The word occurs some eighteen times in the New Testament, and putting together all the varying shades of meanings, an elenctic confrontation can be summed up to be—“a confrontation with error in which error is exposed for what it is, the one guilty of error feels rebuked and compelled to admit his error and, one hopes, is led to repentance.”⁵

Men need to be confronted, error needs to be exposed and God’s concern to bring man into repentance must be passionately made known. And this we can and will do only when we ourselves are convinced about the uniqueness of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Jesus is God’s final word to man, and as Wolfhart Pannenberg points out this is so even in relation to all earlier manifestations of God—“The God of Israel is revealed in the full sense only in Jesus. All earlier self demonstrations by his action are by comparison purely provisional; they are not a definitive self disclosure, and therefore cannot be called in a strict sense God’s self-revelation. What happened in and through Jesus cannot, however, be superseded by any future events, because in him precisely the end of all things has occurred.”⁶

Is it not this kind of confidence in the finality of God’s revelation in Jesus that the early Christians daringly demonstrated in the face of all prevailing philosophies and ideologies? There is therefore no need for us to relax the claims of Christ on man in any way today. Theology must be bold, forthright and able to confront man in whatever situation he may be.

AN ASSURANCE OF AUTHORITY BACKED BY THE SPIRIT OF SERVANTHOOD

Having just spoken about the uniqueness of the Christian revelation it is easy to misconstrue the accent to refer to authority in the sense that the Christian is in command. This is not what we mean. As those confronted by and committed to this revelation of God in Christ, the question will have arisen—on whose authority do we as theologians in India confront our countrymen with the claims of Christ.

I have drawn inspiration from Bishop Lesslie Newbigin’s answer to the question “What right do you have to preach to us?”⁷ In a p. 117 challenging chapter entitled “The question of Authority” he concludes that “the only possible answer is ‘In the name of Jesus’

³ *ibid.* p.149.

⁴ J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co. Philadelphia 1960.

⁵ Peter Cotterell, *The Eleventh Commandment*, IVP 1981 p.16.

⁶ *Faith and Reality*, Search Press 1977. pp.59f.

⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, Eerdmans 1978. pp.13f.

([Acts 4:7-10](#)). They can only refer to the name of Jesus and by that name they refer to an ultimate authority and to their own final commitment to that authority.”⁸

Newbigin goes on to elaborate his answer by first pointing to the matter of personal commitment. “I am—in Pascal’s famous phrase—wagering my life on the faith that Jesus is the ultimate authority.”⁹ Second, he affirms that “the confession I am making is that Jesus is the supreme authority, or, using the language of the New Testament, that “Jesus is Lord”. This confession implies a claim regarding the entire public life of mankind and the whole created world.”¹⁰ And third, he qualified himself saying “I would be distorting the truth if I simply spoke of this confession as being mine alone. I make this confession only because I have been laid hold of by another and commissioned to do so.”¹¹

It is this kind of authority that needs to be demonstrated by the writer of theology. There is no room for watering down the claims of Christ just because such and such a situation demands it. In fact, the demand is from the side of revelation, which of itself has an authority that needs to be laid hold of. There have been tendencies even amongst evangelicals to get on the defensive by making subtle compromises or resorting to dangerous disguises for the sake of social relevance. One needs to be convinced that any theology written with the authority of Jesus behind it will need to be bold and uncompromising so that the reader of this theology will be challenged, equipped and motivated to submit himself to this authority and want further to bring others too into this submission.

But authority is only one side. Servanthood is the other. The authority of Jesus does not make us proud, pompous primates pronouncing judgment on the lost. We must recognize that we are what we are only because of the grace of God. And so, in humility we set out as servants. It is this spirit of servanthood that must season our service.

India has had far too many “lords” and “masters”, who despite any genuine desire to serve the masses have failed. It is only a few who chose servanthood as their role who won the hearts of the masses. This kind of servanthood is not at all alien to the Bible. For [p. 118](#) “even the Son of man came not to be served but to serve.” ([Mt. 20:28](#))

Perhaps one can say that this is more the responsibility of the *writer* and *doer* of theology than of theology itself. True. But can one really separate the writer from his writing? This is the “actualization” I referred to earlier. When God wrote to man it was himself that he revealed. So also theology must embody what we are in ourselves. This kind of combination of authority and servanthood comes through so clearly when Paul reminds the Corinthian Church—“For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as *Lord*, with ourselves as your *servants*.” ([2 Cor. 4:5](#))

THE INTEGRATION OF WORK AND WORSHIP

Indian theology must consciously strive to remove the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. To us Christians this dichotomy comes not only from the predominant Hindu background but also through the hangover of the outdated Thomistic teaching. One needs to be reminded that the Reformation brought about a newer outlook. Although Luther and Calvin did not deliberately intend to achieve this, their efforts brought about a healthy

⁸ p.16.

⁹ p.17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ p.18f.

understanding of God's calling as applying to man in all of his involvement. The radical reformers in Europe went on to set up exclusive working, worshipping communities, but through that, laid the ground for a positive evaluation of work, employment and labour in the light of one's commitment to Christ. This kind of an integration of work and worship is crucial to Christian witness in India today. The dangerous disparity between our work attitude and our worship attitude has weakened our impact on the country. On a positive note it must be said that in India worship is highly respected. But the sad thing is that no connection between work and worship is recognized.

Biblical theology that is written in India today must take this much-needed integration of work and worship far more seriously. The starting point must be to deal with the unhealthy way in which some forms of work are shunned. There are so many elements starting from the doctrine of Creation itself that will lend themselves to upgrading the value of work in all its forms. This accent needs to be woven into the fabric of all our theology. The important factor to note is that in weaving this accent into theology we should not be giving the impression that all our involvement in the country's physical needs is only a disguise to ultimately channel man into the Church. It is an involvement in people's needs because we too are people amongst [p. 119](#) those people. Aren't we all created in the image of God? Should there not then be a commonality that binds me with my fellow man which arouses my concern for him just as a fellow man and not as a potential catch for the Kingdom?

The answer to India's economic problems is not in economic aid. What can do far more is a theology of work that will motivate Christians themselves to the stirring up of all of God's gifts to utilize our minimum resources for maximum output. Such a theology that will recapture the dignity of labour will be creatively dynamic rather than coldly doctrinal. If man can be challenged to be productively involved in God's material creation, worship can become more meaningful.

However, one must be careful not to equate work with worship. All we need to show is that work is not in opposition to worship, but rather an extension of it. While there is a distinction between work and worship we need to note that there is no separation. In a sense, work begins where worship ends and vice versa. For, if our worship is true, our work becomes a continuing expression of love for God the Creator and for his creation.

The Greek word *latreuo*, particularly in [Rom. 12:1](#), is rendered both 'worship' and 'service'. Although this refers primarily to religious service it should be possible for the Christian, who has submitted himself entirely to the Lordship of Christ, to be able to see all of his involvement in the world as an act of adoration for his Master.

However, one must be careful not to destroy the distinctiveness of worship. The commonly used word in the New Testament is *proskuneo*, which refers to a singular reverence for God, honouring him as Lord. Indian Biblical Theology must motivate more meaningful and reverent worship or else it may become a stumbling block to a nation given so sincerely to worship. But we need to know that we would only be transforming true worship if we are encouraged to come to our Master as those who have faithfully fulfilled the tasks that he has called us to perform in his world.

This kind of an intermingling of our work attitudes and our worship attitudes will add immensely to constituting a more powerful witness in India. Injustices, perversions, laziness and superstitions can only be tackled by the participation of a working-worshipping Indian Christian community in the problems of a struggling country. Theology must seek to arouse this concern not from deficient and questionable theologies of liberation and development but by motivating men into more Christlike involvement in the country. And [p. 120](#) this must be achieved from within the very texture of theological concerns.

AN ACCENT ON A DYNAMIC CHURCH WITH REFERENCE TO ITS MISSION

There is no doubt that Theology must be Church centred, as, ultimately it is the Church's responsibility to endorse theology. If this is true, we must recover a more biblical understanding of the church that will liberate it from its being restricted to static denominational structures. Although I am not antidenominational, I affirm that any understanding that confines the church to only the existing institutional framework is unbiblical. In a country where one anticipates the growth of the church to be far more than the present institutional structures can handle, one has got to be willing to recapture the understanding of the church as the people of God on a mission, called out to declare his wonderful deeds. Ecclesiology in this sense must not remain an optional section within the scope of theology. The nature and role of the church should permeate the whole gamut of theological concerns.

I am beginning to see that the model of the Church is perhaps the best model for a dynamic theology. The Church on the one hand has a being of itself which it has to stabilize and strengthen. The people of God gather to worship the head of the Church, God in Christ. This is the basic essential of the Church. It has to confirm its relationship with its creator. Similarly, theology too has a being of itself that it *must* confirm. It must act as an aid to the stability and strength of the worshipping Church.

Yet, on the other hand the Church is called to witness. It is a body in motion, a worshipping community on a witnessing commission. Worship is not the end. It has got to go out in response to the command of Christ. Similarly theology must motivate mission. Just as the Church that ends with worship will be an incomplete church, so a theology that ends with the edification of the reader by increasing his knowledge of God and Christ will be an incomplete theology. Theology has to be actualized in the work and witness of this worshipping community.

To be clear, I am offering the model of the Church to guard against the danger of theology becoming a static academic pursuit on the one hand, yet on the other, to prevent it from being forced into a missiological mould. Mission is not an end in itself.

Once we are able to hold the being and the function of the Church together, some other problems may be resolved too. For instance, [p. 121](#) we in India are struggling to reconcile the relationship of the church to the "para-church" phenomenon. The rather distasteful distinction between these two has become part of the Christian jargon and its continued stress will probably result in a growing distance between the pastoral and the evangelistic ministries. Theology has got to grapple with the task of restating the biblical understanding of the church in its truest sense so that the local church can be seen to envelope all of God's peoples' efforts to confront man with the claims of Christ.

This does not demand an antidenominational or an anti-establishmentarian attitude in any way. Neither does it demand a moratorium on "para-church" agencies! The mission is God's, not man's. God works through his people—the Church, and every individual he chooses to work through is part of this body. A dynamic rather than a static understanding will have to be recovered, so that on the one hand the role of the Church is seen in its truest form, yet on the other, the existence of the so called "mission" or "para-church" agencies will be seen as part of the Church's total activities. And while mission agencies and organizations outside the church should seek to link more strongly with local churches, the local church ought to look more positively at those outside of its four walls as an extension of its own being and function.

CONCLUSION

One will probably argue that this paper restricts itself to missiological issues rather than seeking to discuss wider theological concerns. I will readily concede this. But in doing so I want to emphasize that what India needs is not a cold callous restatement of doctrine and dogma but a potent and productive affirmation of its biblical beliefs. The urgency of the mission and the staggering needs of the country grow before us in greater and greater magnitude. Theology must produce men for this mission.

However, the synthesis of the worship and the witness of the Church which has been used above as a model will demonstrate my real concern for theology. The accent should be on the holding together of the content of theology so that it will both equip and edify as well as motivate for mission. Neither function should be allowed precedence over the other.

The treatment above is far from exhaustive. There are far more accents that one may be able to discuss. For instance, one could go on to develop the need for an accent on community which is so [p. 122](#) much part of the peoples of Asia, and historicity which runs counter to the anti-historical nature of our major religions. But the whole stress ought to be on the fact that theology must be faithful to God and His revelation in the Bible and not relax its terms in any context. This kind of faithful biblical theology within the Indian context will challenge, equip and raise up many more servants of God to set out on the task of confronting their countrymen with the claims of Christ.

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Towards an Evangelical Latin American Theology

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This article is abridged.
(Editor)

INTRODUCTION

Now that we have heard a criticism of our theology and an exposition of the Biblical basis for theological reflection, we need to ask ourselves where we are going in our efforts to produce an evangelical Latin American theology. In answer to this question we will refer first to all the need for that theology. Then we will have a general description of what we understand by “*evangelical* theology;” and finally we will present what the term “*Latin American*” means to us in a theological context. In this way we hope to cover all the elements included in the title of this paper: *Towards an Evangelical Latin American Theology*.

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY