# Evangelical Review of Theology

## A Global Forum

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 40 · Number 4 · October 2016

Published by

Paternoster:
thinking faith

WEA
WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE
*Theological Commission*

for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

ERT (2016) 40:4, 356-368

# Three Horizons for Theology

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WHY DO THEOLOGY? To which end, and for what purpose does one teach and study theology?

In a time which questions the past and all traditions that are thoughtlessly inherited, and in a time that endeavours to live rationally, one needs to have reason for doing theology. There are enough people around who challenge theology as unnecessary, or even illegitimate; as immaterial, irrelevant, unproductive, or as 'mere theory'. What is theology for? would be a question naturally asked e.g. by all who have imbibed America's spirit of pragmatism. Often, those who do theology have themselves little theoretical clarity about their purposes and horizons. (If they had this clarity, it would much more visibly influence their everyday work.)

The answer to these questions lies in a rediscovery and recapitulation of theology's intrinsic purposes and horizons. Theology does not rest in itself, it does not hold its meaning in itself. It receives its dignity from its points of reference.

Using a term from recent philosophical anthropology, we might speak of theology's 'eccentric' (ex-centric) existence, i.e. as an entity that has its centre outside itself. Christians are to 'no longer live for themselves' (2 Cor 5:15)—how would something not be determinative for Christian theology which characterizes the Christian life as a whole?

The problem arises from the tension inherent in theology's position: it has to *acquire* knowledge and then to dispense it, i.e., to serve with it, to apply that knowledge. It is a dialectic of take and give, of collecting and dispensing, of theory and practice, truth and love—another of those cases where you need to have both, two times one hundred per cent.

As fallible human beings, we never find that easy. Nevertheless, the concept of teaching contains already, structurally, the two sides of collecting and dispensing, taking in and giving out, inasmuch as teaching itself presupposes learning. Christian theology in its very nature addresses itself to people, i.e., to a horizon and purpose beyond itself.

## I Theology's Horizon: The Church

The horizon of theology that comes to mind most immediately is the church. Theology is to serve the church, to help towards the edification of the 'Temple

*This is a re-print of an article first published in our issue of January 1981 (11:1), pages 5-20. At the time, the author, Professor Klaus Bockmuehl, (D Theol, Basel) was professor of Systematic Theology at Regent College, Vancouver, Canada. Bockmuehl, a former chaplain and parish minister, had also served on the faculty of St Chrischona Seminary, Basel, and was a member of the WEA Theological Commission 1976-1980.*

of God' which is made up of human beings. Theology serves to expand and constantly to restore that building, the church.

One may see this perhaps under the image of St. Francis' reconstructing a small dilapidated chapel outside the city of Assisi, originally dedicated to the delivery from the plague. This was the first step which St. Francis of Assisi chose to take after his conversion in order to demonstrate his love of God.

Or one might compare it to the more elaborate masons' guild who work towards the completion of a cathedral but continue all the time with the work of restoration that never comes to an end with such a large structure, especially today when industry's emissions of acid smoke attack and corrode the building material.

The church is never established once and for all. This is obvious in view of the ever-flowing stream of generations of humanity. The people of God are under the charge 'that we should not hide the things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us, but tell the coming generation of the glorious deeds of the Lord and his might and the wonderful works that he has done' (Ps 74:3f.).

This then is the horizon of theology: the future life of the church; to present each generation anew with the evidence of God's grace and glory. Therefore theology must always become contemporary, although it has its fundaments and its basic content, its 'dogma' in the past. Dogma, i.e., that which is to be taught, is for us not just a collection of doctrinal propositions, but primarily the facts of the history of salvation.

Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, has given us a handy and concise formula for these aspects of service, which theology must adopt: it is committed to 'the defence and confirmation of the gospel' (Phil 1:7). That includes defence: the theologian will in part resemble a watchdog who defends the flock, or at least detects, engages, perhaps unmasks the assailant. This represents the task of apologetics. For a variety of reasons, that today is a difficult and unpleasant task. But in principle, the church is always, as it were, moving in hostile territory where the duties of reconnaissance and defence are indispensable.

Using a reference that has often been pondered in the history of Christian doctrine, we might say that theology, serving the church, in its own ways continues Christ's threefold work, his prophetic, priestly, and royal offices: the prophetic office in the task of teaching, the priestly office defined as 'presenting every man mature in Christ' (Col 1:28), and the royal office, not in the sense of dominion (Mt 20:20), *not* according to the human adage, 'Knowledge is power', but in the Old Testament sense of a king's task of shepherding and service to the people—in a word, *pastoral* work.

Teaching, nurturing, shepherding and defending the church: this is the continuation of Christ's own work. This was at first the work of the apostle, summed up by Paul in the words, 'my concern for all the churches' (2 Cor 11:28). It is then also an attitude and ethos which the theologian must follow. If we pray for the church with the words of the Psalmist: 'O God, see and have regard for this vine and the vineyard which your right hand has planted' (Ps 80:14f.), we must also

be ready to be employed by God in the respective work of cultivation in God's plantation.

Some of us indeed need a new dedication and commitment to the church as such. This applies in two ways: one, that we distinguish between the 'macro-' and the 'micro-' aspect of the church (as they speak of macro- and micro-economics). We must learn to concern ourselves both with the present and with the prospects of the whole of Christianity ('my concern for all the churches'), the macro-aspect, and with the welfare of our immediate fellow-Christian or our own congregation, the micro-aspect.

Secondly, commitment to the life of the church may mean that we put its welfare and prosperity before all other considerations. If we all now apply ourselves to social ethics: to the poor, to race relations, and to the problems of peace, who will make the well-being of the 'vineyard' their overarching purpose?

Clearly, theology is the maid-servant of the church, and those are mistaken who pursue theology as an end in itself or feel responsible only to a community of scholars. If it should come to pass that we become estranged from this first horizon of theology, the commitment to the church, we might at least begin to recover ground by permitting this horizon to form and determine our prayer, our *prayer* of intercession.

## II Theology's Horizon: Humanity

Christian theology has a commitment to a second horizon, i.e. to humanity. Its purpose here is the physical and spiritual sustainment of humanity as God's creation.

This can be seen in at least three directions. One is the basic work of the sustainment of the lives of people in times of material need. In Scripture, the symbolic figure for this kind of work is Joseph in Egypt, Joseph the Provider who understands his commission as: 'God has sent me … to preserve life …, to keep alive many survivors', through a period of utter poverty and starvation (Gen 45:5–7).

Theology's task, then, is to teach a householder-ethic, to keep this horizon of preserving life in mind all the time and to inspire and train those people who are meant to take practical responsibility in this way.

Second, this programme of physical preservation has its counterpart in the realm of the moral and spiritual. Theology mediates what sometimes has been called the 'civilizing effect of the gospel'. This comes to pass primarily through the proclamation of the commandments. Their work is the civilization and ordering of the wild and untamed drives and inclinations of humanity. We can think of the moral education of humanity as cultivating of some acreage or even as opening up a whole continent. It takes the form of 'forays into the primeval forest', the creation of clearances which are then tilled and cultivated to bring produce and fruit in the sustainment of social life.

In his attempt to prove the non-existence of God, John Wisdom, the British agnostic, devised the intriguing analogy of a clearing in the jungle, with nicely laid-out garden beds, but where you were never able to see the gardener, nor ever to trap him—perhaps by night, through spread-out wires or

some means—proving in effect that there could not be a gardener at all.

The British philosopher, A. J. Ayer, chose a very pertinent and meaningful image. The world, human society and civilization especially, indeed is similar to such an opening in the midst of nature seen as a vast, unchartable forest. (The image, by the way, also intimates that the question of how order in the midst of chaos and wilderness could have come about, whether by chance or not, i.e. the teleological argument for the existence of God, can never come to rest!)

However, not only is the *development* of human life and culture a task of moral education in the beginning: civilization and culture need *continued* care and maintenance; they must constantly be defended against the pressure of the surrounding jungle of moral anarchism and chaos. Of this battle in defence of civilized human existence against the destructive forces in human nature the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset said, 'Rest and relax for a moment, and the jungle creeps in'. There can be no culture or civilization without a moral and spiritual structure that is constantly serviced.

Theology has this task of teaching and maintaining God's creational ordinances and commandments and so helping to fulfil God's cultural commission to sustain human life. Without this ongoing work, nations will sink into godlessness, anarchy, and self-destruction. At the same time, this means setting up the presupposition for the fulfilment of Christ's great commission.

The third contribution of theology towards the preservation of culture and human existence lies in the practical presentation of regenerate men and women who have a distinct and regenerating effect on the life of society also. Again here, theology must teach the macro- *and* the micro-aspect of the Christian commitment to the sustainment of humanity, to mankind as much as to the man who fell among the robbers.

The physical and moral sustainment of *humanity* is not a horizon of theology to which evangelicals relate easily. Sometimes their general attitude is not dissimilar to the mediaeval lifestyle of withdrawal and contemplation of another world. Even when their interest is directed to the world we are living in, evangelicals tend to concentrate on and limit their loyalty to church or chapel.

Such attitude tends to be little concerned with the question, 'Where is humanity going?' and dispenses itself from the household-ethos laid out earlier. Sometimes, therefore, one has to look to some of the mainline churches to find a place where the sustainment of creation and compassion for the large flock of sheep without a shepherd find a denominational homestead.

In a dramatic way, shortly before the outbreak of World War II, evangelicals were challenged to recover this wider horizon of the biblical householder ethic. In a memorable speech given in Sweden in 1938, Frank N. D. Buchman, the founder of the Oxford Group movement, challenged his listeners to go beyond their established interests. Some wished to see their own lives changed, he said. That was good and indeed necessary. Some hoped to learn how to change others. Very good also. Some were looking out for a revival. Even better! But then there was a fourth level of concern, namely the

question: how can a crumbling civilization be saved?

This is where evangelicals sometimes find it difficult to follow. It is conceivable that in the summer of 1938, some people would have made fun of the phrase, 'to save a crumbling civilization', because they could not perceive a threat to society of that magnitude. Worse, some evangelicals might have said to themselves as a matter of principle: 'What do I care? I hold no brief for saving civilization. It is going to crumble anyway.'

Less than a year later World War II had begun. In its course, it brought untold death and suffering to many nations, not least to God's own people of Israel. I wonder whether evangelicals looking at World War II and the Holocaust really mean to shrug their shoulders and say: 'What do you expect? That is the lot of fallen humanity'.

Since the end of World War II, we have seen western civilization, i.e. the civilization of those nations that received the gospel, crumble in yet other ways: in the breakdown of its moral structure and the consequent misery of large numbers of human beings—the destruction of family life for millions, a tidal wave of dissolution of marriages, of cruelty and crime, of annihilation of unborn children. The one thing still missing to date is the logical end of it all: civil war and general anarchy. Again, should all that suffering, borne by guilty and innocent alike, as the outcome of man's rebellion against God, leave the Christian unperturbed and merely evoke a scolding, 'I told you so'?!

Theology does have an immediate correlation to the well-being of humanity, because the latter directly corresponds to the observation of the divine ordinance for creation and the blessing coming with it. 'To save a crumbling civilization' means nothing else than to go back to the Ten Commandments and especially the First, and to teach nations respectively.

In addition, theology—through the church—owes the world the proclamation of the gospel, the implementation of the Great Commission, making disciples of all nations. It is not without relevance that Frank Buchman expressed concern for the survival of civilization after he had spoken about personal change. He envisaged no prospect of saving humanity without the concrete conversion of at least a creative minority.

This exactly fits the Old Testament principle of the ten just people for the sake of whose presence a city may be spared. Abraham for one prayed to this extent, pleading for the salvation of his city. Christians should do no less than that. They have been expressly taught to make 'requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving for everyone—especially for kings and all those in authority …' (1 Tim 2:1f). This prayer is the beginning of the exercise of Christian concern for humanity.

## III Theology's Horizon: God

We have reminded ourselves that the life of the church must be the horizon of theology. We have pointed to the existence of humanity as a second horizon of theology. The third emphasis must be on God as the horizon of theology.

This can easily seem to be a truism: is not God the object of theology anyway? Indeed, but that definition does not safeguard theology against exam-

ining God just like a flower or a stone or a corpse.

If God is truly the horizon of theology, then theology in itself must be divine service, service of God. If it is true that the First Commandment is the basic presupposition of all theology in the biblical mode, then the first petition of the Lord's prayer, 'Hallowed be your name', must be theology's primary intent. Theology must become *doxology*, glorification of God. Psalm 71:14, 'I will yet add to all your praise', must be its watchword.

Christian theology will therefore always include a spiritual commitment. In the last analysis, a formula like 'Theology and Spirituality' ought to be a tautology, saying the same thing twice over: theology already includes spirituality, inasmuch as it is doxology, praise of God. It is surely essential to have courses on Christian spirituality. However, spirituality cannot be seen merely as the topic of a special lecture course as an appendix to the theological curriculum, just as academic excellence cannot be the subject of a particular class. Both academic excellence and spirituality are part of, and must permeate, the whole of theology.

What we are looking at, theology and doxology, can be further described under two aspects, one internal and the other external.

The internal aspect is best expressed by saying that theology has the *love of God* as its presupposition and its aim. Theology must always take to heart the words of blessing in the Anglican Order of Communion: 'The peace of God … keep your hearts and minds in the *knowledge and love* of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.'

'Knowledge and love of God' is the proper biblical rendering of that term borrowed from the Greek, 'theology'. Whoever preaches the First Commandment, the foundational principle of theology, will also have to look towards its positive complement, the commandment, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment' (Mt 22:37f.). In doing theology, love of God then is the true corollary of knowing God. It is the proper safeguard against dealing with God as with a dead object, an attitude that we can otherwise never be sure to avoid.

What is love of God? It is not the mystical fusion between man and godhead, a process in which man thinks he can enthusiastically surpass—and master—that which the Bible teaches. On the other hand, love of God overcomes the distance of servanthood as others have described the God-relationship. It is neither merger nor distance; therefore Scripture speaks of Christians as 'children of God'. Love of God is like the trusting and obedient love children might have towards their parents.

Love also means friendship. Love of God includes identifying with God's concerns (something that theology as mere knowledge of God again does not guarantee). This is well expressed in the lines of Manfred Siebald, a Christian singer popular in Europe: 'I will rejoice when people speak well of you, and will be sad, when someone scoffs and jeers.' Or, with other words from the same source: theology, when it loves God, will 'penetrate the world and bring it back to God'.

Such love of God is the basic presupposition of Christian theology.

The Old Testament already indicates: Knowledge comes through communion. Love of God is therefore the precondition of true knowledge of God. The best model for love of God we have is in Jesus as, e.g., the Gospel of John depicts him. His is not a sentimental but a determined love, comprising utter trust, unity of mind, obedience, and a commitment to loyalty, come rain or shine.

Jesus expects the same from his disciples. The question in John 20, 'Do you love me?', seems to define the one and only condition for working in Christ's kingdom. It addresses the theologian, too. It is by far not taken seriously enough in today's theology; the same is true of the commission in the same chapter, 'Feed my sheep'.

However, love of God, where it comes about, is a gift from God (Rom 5:5); it must first of all be received. Therefore we can safely say: all theological endeavour worth its salt will have to begin with a prayer of supplication—for the Holy Spirit who creates the love of God in a person's heart. That is the beginning of theology.

Love of God is not only the prerequisite, it is also the end and target of theology; theology's task is above all to promote, inspire, encourage, uphold and strengthen love of God in people. In all its labour, theology is to work towards the goal that people love God with all their heart. 'That is the first and greatest commandment', and at the same time it fulfils the actual purpose of the divine work of salvation.

If, then, love of God is both the presupposition and the aim of theology, we are facing a sequence of 'loving God—knowing God—loving God', from love to love, which matches the same formula for faith in Romans 1:17.

Concerning this, Protestant theology has a long way to catch up. In Protestantism, we are faced with a tradition of disregard for, if not discrimination against, love for God, and the virtual reduction of our God-relationship to the attitude of faith. Probably this represents a reaction to the wrong place that love of God was given in the mediaeval doctrine of salvation.

The Catholic church taught that faith alone did not save, but only a faith characterized by love (*fides caritate formata*). That, of course, smacked of works-righteousness and was rejected outright by the Reformers. However, there is yet a whole life to be lived on the basis of justification by faith alone, and it is a life of love for God and neighbour. To separate love from faith would be nothing but another example of elevating a negative reaction into a positive proposition—which is at best but a dim reflection of the truth.

There may yet be another reason for the lack of an attitude of worship and love of God in theology, the destructive consequences of which are incalculable. The problem is that theology has long been taught merely as a ministry of knowledge, hardly ever as a service of love. That is a Greek inheritance. 'Greeks sought after wisdom' (1 Cor 1:22). St Paul and St John, however, united truth and love, and in so doing separated Christianity from the Greek mentality.

Even beyond that necessary correction of theory, what is practically needed in theology today, is more eagerness and determination for the glory of God, so that we earnestly seek God's honour in theology, church, and national life. There seem to be far too few people

who pursue such purpose single-mindedly, even if they still go about it in a somewhat dilettante way. Both among the old and the young there is too little zeal for God today.

Theology is doxology. Love of God speaks: 'I will yet add to all your praise' (Ps 71:14). This leads to the second, i.e., the *external* aspect mentioned. If theology is essentially praise of God, it must have the immediate effect of *proclamation* of God's glory. This is something that we are more easily aware of. It is theology's natural desire and horizon to 'proclaim and publish' (Jonah 3:7) the honour of God, until 'the whole earth be filled with his glory, Amen and Amen' (Ps 72:19).

When the psalmist proclaims, 'All the earth shall worship you and sing praises to you; they shall sing praises to your name' (Ps 66:4), then that is still in the future, and on the horizon. Pointing the way towards it today, however, is the task of theology.

## IV The Three Horizons: Inter-Relations

In enumerating three horizons for theology, we have spoken first of the church, second of humanity, and third of God. This sequence was prompted by the degree to which people might habitually connect theology with any of these horizons. The proper order would of course be first God, second the church, and third humanity.

If we list them in this order, and so put 'love of God' in first place, we will see behind the three horizons of theology Christ's *'Double Commandment of Love'*—love of God and love of neighbour—thereby dividing the second commandment according to the biblical procedure into love of (Christian) brother and love of neighbour. In a nutshell, then, it can be said that *theology must do its work in fulfilment of the 'Double Commandment of Love'*.

The two sides of this 'Double Commandment' are closely interrelated, in the sense that whosoever loves God will necessarily become a benefactor of people. One thinks of Psalm 84:5f., Israel's pilgrimage psalm: 'Blessed are those whose strength is in you (O Lord), in whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the valley of Baca (misery, a desolate place), they make it a place of springs.'

Those who find in God the source of their strength and the goal of their journey, then begin to create new prospects for life even under adverse conditions, create springs, and oases in a desert, and establish 'sanctuaries', both places of worship and places of refuge in the torrents of history, for those generations of humanity that seemed to be bereft of grace.

To turn a dry and dismal situation into 'a place of springs' is a task of spiritual as well as material dimensions. Where there is love of God, everything is set up for bringing about the benefit for people, too. On the other hand, not much substantial welfare work can be expected, where the premise of faith and friendship with God is missing.

It is, moreover, the natural thing that all three horizons be kept in mind simultaneously. Perhaps it does not even take separate acts to address them all, if we do theology in a truly biblical fashion. As an analogy, the great spiritual oratorios, those by Johann Sebastian Bach among others, the Christmas oratorio, or the St. Matthew Passion, seem to serve all three

horizons: they glorify God, they contain spiritual edification and instruction for the believer, but in addition they obviously have a generally civilizing effect.

I wonder whether the same cannot also be said about the great cathedrals and their sculptures, friezes and paintings—that is, wherever art is used to enhance the communication of the gospel. Theology's work is not dissimilar to this, and also alike in its manifold effects.

Theology can be like the building of a cathedral or the composition of an oratorio. More often, it will perhaps be like the ongoing, more humble work of restoration of the chapel that has suffered from corrosion and neglect over time or the present-day performance of an oratorio created in the past. Both, however, the original and the reproduction, have an intrinsic dignity, even if they mean toil and labour, because of the majesty and magnitude of the object implied.

God, church, and humanity are the three indispensable horizons of theology. Let me underline this with a further reference. That threesome seems to have impressed itself on a medieval monastic author (published under the name of St. Bernard) even as he planned to write otherwise. In a treatise on 'How to Live Well', this author has an extended chapter, arguing the superiority of the contemplative life of the monk and the nun in the monastery over the active life of the working man and woman in the world. These latter live '*in mola*', in the mill (taken from Mt 24:48)—really a treadmill!—whereas monk and nun are '*in sinu*', in Abraham's bosom, in the bliss with God (taken from Lk 16:22).

Of course, the author does not fail to exploit the pericope of Martha and Mary for his purpose. The monk and nun, sitting at the feet of Jesus, like Mary have chosen the one thing necessary. Suddenly, however, the author becomes aware of a third position that needs looking after: the one '*in agro*', the priest, in the field, where the task is, as it were, the continuation of the work of Christ himself, sowing the Word of God into the field of humanity ('the field is the world', Mt 13:37)—the proclamation of the Word, making disciples of all nations.

Our monastic author then acknowledges the existence of three modes of life: life in the world, in the church, and in missions, and with God, although he, of course, attaches different value to them. Also, in his time he felt that the three lifestyles were cast into three different groups of people: the workaday layman in the 'mill', the parish priest in the 'field', and the monk in the presence of God through contemplation.

The Reformation, reverting to the New Testament, attempted to show that fundamentally all three modes of life are both the privilege and duty of *every* Christian: to work under the cultural commission of the Creator, to fulfil the Great Commission of the Saviour, *and* to experience the fellowship of the Holy Spirit with God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. And they all three have their own intrinsic value respectively.

Thus, likewise, theology must be committed to three horizons of the Christian: to God, church, and humanity.

## V Opposition: Secularism

If the commitment of theology is, as has been said, rightly represented by the Psalmist's prayer, 'I will yet add to all your praise', then theology must always find itself in opposition to and combat with another form of commitment, dedicated to the pursuit of a quite different horizon. For the resolve, 'I will yet add to all your praise', is the direct antithesis to *secularism* and human autonomy. This is the attitude of Prometheus, the ancient rebel of Greek mythology, who rejects the idea of submission to God, and wants to be the Creator of his own world, collecting all the praise for himself.

Secularism, the philosophy of human self-rule and self-development, may perhaps welcome theology's concern for humanity. It will sometimes even allow for theology's occupation with the church, as some sub-division of humanity. In the manner in which secularism does at times respect ethnic diversity, it might concede a breathing space or a niche of existence for the church on the grounds of the preservation of folklore.

There is some of this sentiment around today in the more enlightened universities and in liberal governments. However, secularism will never be reconciled to theology's first horizon, the primacy and kingship of God, because it is in itself the very negation of the same, and the solemn confession of man's autonomy and omnipotence.

Insofar as theology's first horizon, the kingship and honour of God, is the strength and inspiration of its two other horizons, the denial of that first horizon would quickly make theology useless also in its intended service to church and humanity. It would become the salt that 'is good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men' (Mt 5:13). This description fits a theology that has forgotten God. For theology, therefore, along with its first horizon, God, the two other horizons also are at stake. This means, essentially, that there cannot be a partial union of theology with secularism.

In the eternal confrontation of these two competitors our own age seems to present the picture of an overall advance of secularism. Indeed, in terms of the success of its propaganda and of its actual accumulation of power, the advance of secularism is as real, manifold, cunning, and seemingly irresistible as was Hitler's advance and expansion in Europe in the years before World War II. Those who early on studied the nature of this phenomenon felt stunned and helpless year after year, when he landed one scoop after the other, and one territory after the other fell into the orbit of the dictator.

Secularism, the system that rejects or ignores the sovereignty of God, has been similarly successful in our time. God has allowed its advance. One is reminded of Psalm 74:15, 'You broke open fountains and brooks; you dried up mighty rivers'. Such can be said also of periods in the spiritual history of humanity, and of Christianity in the West: rivers of spiritual life, once mighty, have dried up under the scorching breach of secularism.

The history of Israel presents us with striking analogies to the spiritual crises of our time. Does not the psalmist's wailing over Israel as God's vineyard also apply to some contemporary churches: 'Why have you broken down its wall so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit … and ravage it?'

(Ps 80:12; cf. 79:1). This image seems to fit some Protestant churches which were planted and 'took deep root and filled the land' (Ps 80:9) after the Reformation, but are now stripped and torn up by every bypasser—i.e., by all the philosophical and ideological fashions that come and go, by existentialism, sociologism, psychologism, group dynamics, anarchism, diverse political programmes, etc.

It is ever so absurd that the church, vehicle and representative of the divine doctrine of salvation, should welcome and submit itself to all these secular programmes of salvation—for such they all are. Man cannot avoid producing his own myths of salvation once he has rejected the biblical gospel. The irony and tragic paradox in today's church is that we apparently prefer to listen to worldly prophets and obtain our revelations from paganism.

In addition, the cry, 'O God, heathen have come into your inheritance' (Ps 79:1) seems to be the proper description of the advancement of secularism *within theology* itself. Originally, the plan was to be the reverse: 'He [God] apportioned the nations for a possession and settled the tribes of Israel in their houses' (Ps 78:55). That was to be the analogy to the relationship e.g. between theology and philosophy: existing thought concepts were to be made serviceable to theology and thus to the people of God.

As an aside: this indeed is a task of continuing relevance for theology. 'Freedom of theology from philosophy'—that popular slogan can only mean theology's supremacy, not the annihilation or ignoring of philosophy. Theology will utilize elements of the form, but not the contents, the creeds and confessions of philosophy.

Theology, like all our thinking, is embedded in language and terminology. Nevertheless, who rules over whom, who determines policy and direction, and who are the free citizens, who are the 'hewers of wood and drawers of water', ought to be established clearly between theology and philosophy. Therefore there is no such thing as an 'absolute' theology which would not make use of existing thought-forms, categories, and concepts.

Who serves whom? At present, theology serves far too often as lackey and train-bearer of secularist philosophies, paying homage, burning incense to the idols of public opinion that are intellectually in fashion at any moment. Whenever theology becomes a fellow-traveller in the parade of the *saeculum*, an alienation from its own true God must quietly have taken place before, a period of attempted self-sufficiency, self-rule, self-confidence, self-service.

At one point, there must have been a deliberate stop to listening to God's Word, followed by an effort to construe the highest good from below, with existing materials and thus in a syncretistic manner. From there it is only a short road to the new subservience to idolatry.

Whom does theology serve? That is the key problem. Its solution will have far reaching consequences either way. The decomposition of theology and church, i.e., of the temple as the place where God's praise should have its dwelling, will mean that other fields of human valuation, literature, economics, must also decay because the centre is no longer intact.

## VI Conclusion: What Is To Be Done?

'Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain … against the Lord and his anointed?' (Ps 2:1). It somehow seems to be 'normal' that God is surrounded by human enmity. How should it be easier for theology? In the midst of secularism, theology must stand up for the hallowing of God's name. Its task is to announce God ever anew to an ungodly and godless generation. And perhaps it will fall to our lot, where circumstances demand it, to even announce God afresh to theology.

In a situation characterized by the advance of secularism, love of God and the First Commandment need to be given new emphasis. Some try to evade this confrontation. They endeavour to keep the salt pure by separating it from the earth. Christ, however, called his disciples to be 'salt of the world'. That clearly is a paradox, a forceful conjunction of two antithetical elements. Christ's disciples are to be 'in the world, but not of the world'. The same goes for theology. The best service that it can give to the world is the unabated proclamation of God's law and gospel.

This is something that neither the withdrawers nor the Christian advocates of accommodation or submission to the spirit of the age seem to understand. If the people of God are to 'live in their houses' (Ps 78:55), i.e., if the truth of the gospel is to find a home in the houses of the heathen, then the solution of the Rechabites (Jer 35) imitated by some evangelicals today, i.e., to culturally and intellectually live in tents next door to society, cannot be the way. We find ourselves with the task of steering straight through between withdrawal and surrender to secularism. This course must determine the solution of all individual problems, from epistemology to ethics.

Here we get into the question of appropriate strategy. If we compare the advance of secularism in the church with a tidal wave or flash flood then the task is to recover lost territory. We will need to build dykes, to 'draw a line'. That looks like defensive action. However, the Dutch have shown us that building dykes (e.g. the great closing dykes in the north and west of Holland) can very well be a means of offensive.

We sometimes may need, in our individual lives as well as in the lives of churches or nations, a fundamental decision comparable to building a dyke, behind which we can then begin to wrestle patches and sections of 'polder' land from the sea, winning fertile acreage, positively cultivating new life under the protection of a basic refusal.

How does all this apply today? What does 'I will yet add to all your praise' mean in our generation? It would mean the emergence, in the remaining two decades of this century, of new spiritual power centres, of movements of concentration towards the love of God and praise of God, in the sense of the three first petitions of the Lord's Prayer. There have been such 'nodal points' before in history, periods of intensification of awareness of, and commitment to, God. We should strive for such a development in our own generation.

A word of warning: to bring humanity back to God and to turn theology God-ward again, or at least to incorporate a public alternative to secularism—this is not necessarily identical with evangelicalism. Admittedly there are valuable points and possessions in

this camp. However, there can also be among evangelicals, both quite unregenerate stubbornness and incompetence regarding some of the relevant issues. Conversion to God is never the same as conversion to a peculiar ecclesiastical party or denomination.

We are after all a re-Christianization of theology. Again, this is not a matter of the spirit of a certain locale which was traditionally associated with renewal. Also, it is not a matter of a particular kind of language. Indeed, how difficult is it even to utter ten coherent sentences towards this concern with some degree of force and authority! It is always difficult to spell out a vision. What it takes, is a continuous, qualitative, spiritual change in our theological work. And that can begin anywhere.

One needs to be thankful for all that has already been given to us. In addition, one would dearly invite everybody who shares the vision, wherever he or she may come from, to help to point out the way to a renewal of theology.

There is one final concern which, if we didn't notice it for ourselves, the psalms quoted would quickly call to our attention. It refers to the basic problem, even the paradox of theology:—i.e., entrusting to human hands a divine task. We are faced with human incapacity for the task of theology, speaking of God.

One becomes conscious of this problem only when one understands what theology truly is. As long as we think of theology in terms of religious anthropology, or of the history, psychology, sociology, phenomenology, of religion, we are on relatively safe ground—because we are dealing with nothing but ourselves. As soon, however, as we have to understand and speak the things of *God*, we are incompetent, as incompetent as any other human being. It takes a cleansing of our lips (Is 6); it takes an act of forgiveness on God's part (Ps 78:38ff.) to establish and restore theology to its proper position and so to its three horizons of commitment.

It also takes an act of God to bring about another nodal point in history when his truth prevails again over human's lies and rebellion, and when he himself, now seemingly distant, as well as the distant church, distant humanity, and our distant neighbour come into focus again.