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Theology for a Missionary Church

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More than forty years ago P. T. Forsyth uttered a strong protest against the fairly wide-spread belief that theology has no necessary place in Christianity. He said that an undogmatic Christianity and purely human, mystical, subjective kind of Christ might be cherished for one's self or an audience, but that it could not be preached by the church of the ages. Both in the West and in the East there is an idea that theology is irrelevant to true religion and that ministers who occupy themselves with it could be far better engaged in giving their attention to more pressing problems. 'Practical' sermons are often far better appreciated than theological sermons.

Some years ago I was greatly concerned about the lack of attention paid by a certain Missionary Society to the religious side of missionary work. I thought it was mere unconscious neglect. About that time a book was published called *Re-Thinking Missions* and I became aware that behind the attitude of the missionaries was a definite theology. Soon after this came Kraemer's *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World* and I realized that I was a witness to the strife of two rival theologies for the soul of the missionary movement. There was a theology behind the rise of the missionary movement at the end of the eighteenth century. There was a theology behind the actions of missionary societies twenty or thirty years ago; and there is a theology behind the reorientation of missionary activities after the Tambaram Conference of 1938. There always is a theology behind us. We do not become non-theological by paying no attention to our theology.

Fortunately theology is not *logos Theou*, the word of God. It is a human word, not a divine word. It is man's word about God. It is *sermo de divinitate* not *sermo divinus*. Theology will bear obvious traces of the time and place in which it takes shape, of particular intellectual trends that are current when it rises and even of the special bent of the great mind that gives it to us. But a theology has serious responsibilities. Not any word about God can pretend to be theology. It has been demanded that it should be of God, from God, in His presence and for His glory. Because theology is human it does not mean that every theology is sound. Algebra and physics are human sciences but not every system of algebra or physics is right. I cannot form my own system in either of these sciences and insist that it is right. Theology may depend on many factors but we must see that the theology behind our actions is sound.

In one sense we may not perhaps speak of a theology for a missionary Church. It may be said that theology cannot be made to order ; that it is in the economic sphere that supply can be made to suit demand ; and that a theology is the matrix of a movement in the Church and not its product. But a theology is both a matrix and a product. A theology may give birth to a movement and movement may give birth to a theology. A theology may move us and we may be moved to a theology.

The Necessity for a Theology

The Church in India arose from a theology and exists because of a theology. But it must also proceed to a theology. A Church that refuses to theologize is not merely abdicating one of its functions, it is refusing to accept the very principle of its life. Expression is the answer to the challenge of environment. The Church has been called by God ; it exists on Him ; it exists for Him. It must think and speak about Him in the environment in which it exists. The moment it does this it is theologizing.

Much of the prejudice against theology may go if it is realized that there has been a lot of unconscious theology already produced in India. Theology does not cease to be itself because it has not been named or known as such. It is scarcely possible for a church to have been in a country for more than two centuries without its producing some sort of theology, that is, without the members of that church thinking and speaking and writing as Christians on subjects that have come within its purview as a church. If such a theology was produced by persons of a limited outlook and insufficient knowledge, it may be defective and even distorted. If it did not attempt to think things through it may be fragmentary ; but it will still be theology if it has taken up consistent positions upon the subjects treated. However no church can depend upon such theology to draw from in its work.

The first task that must be undertaken by a church like that in India in the discharge of its theological responsibility is the proper education of the prospective theologian. The theologian must be a person of a deeply consecrated spirit. No one may be willing to be denied the right to a theology though not everyone may always put the right to conscious use. However, only a person who is spiritually at home in the things he speaks about can be allowed by the church to expound its theology. But a Theologian must also be a person who, to say the least, will not get lost along the intellectual highways of the world. Besides this he must also be a person who can think in terms of his environment. While the State has in recent years begun to remodel its system of education on the basis of a closer relation to environment, our theological colleges are slower in recognizing the need for doing this. After all, the chief agencies charged with shaping our prospective theologians are the theological colleges. They should give high priority to two tasks in their programmes, viz: establishing or strengthening post-graduate departments and relating their syllabus to our environment.

Differences in Approach

Writing some years ago, Dr Kraemer said that ' the Christian Church in both the West and the East is virtually confronted with the same

fundamental problem'. His point was that the West had been getting so rapidly secularized that the church stood in a non-Christian world all over the world. The report of the conversion of England by the Commission set up by Archbishop Temple and presented to the Church Assembly, I believe, at the end of 1945, recognized this fact and was concerned with the solution of the problem raised by it. The task of the Church may be the same in the West and the East. But the same task may have to be done in different ways in different places. The point about a Missionary Church wherever it might be is that it has to deliver its message to an audience that does not hold that message. But it is obvious that the audience may be of various kinds.

The two factors to be taken into account in assessing the needs and nature of an audience are its historical circumstances and its own distinctive traits. These may be said to form the constitutive factors of the audience. The historical circumstances in which the church in Africa or India is placed are not the same as the circumstances of the church in the West. In the West the church is *vis a vis* secularism; and a secularism that often is a distortion or reaction against Christianity. Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr is fond of saying that Marxism is a secularized version of Christianity. As regards Africa, Bishop Stephen Neill has said that the church must go back to the experience of the Middle Ages to get instruction on how to deal with beliefs about magic and evil spirits. In India the church is *vis a vis* great non-Christian religious systems that have grown up spontaneously. People may differ not merely in regard to the historical circumstances in which they may be situated, but also despite the basic sameness of human nature everywhere, in regard to temperament and outlook. Dr. John Macay wrote an article some months ago on people living on the frontiers of logic. It is not possible to hold rigidly that some people live within the realm of logic, others on the frontiers and others outside the pale. The science of reasoning has different rules in different intellectual areas. The absolutes of thinking and reasoning have a habit of differing. What weighs or decides matters in one place may not do the same in another place. A missionary church formulating its theology must therefore take into account the intellectual temperament of the people it is concerned with.

The Divisions of Theology

It is possible to divide Theology into three main sections: Historical, Systematical and Practical. Historical Theology deals with the study and interpretation of the original documents behind the message of the church, of the reception of the message and of the religion and cultures and ideas of those to whom the message is taken. Systematic Theology consists of dogmatics, ethics and apologetics; and Practical Theology deals with the issues which confront the Church in its various operations. Some branches of Theology may look autonomous, yet most of them are closely interlocked and the interdependence of all theology has rightly been stressed. Very little theology fails to be influenced by what goes on in other branches. It is quite obvious how much work has to be done in most branches of theology in an Indian setting. It is of course absurd to say that nothing has been done so far. But the application of consecrated minds, trained and equipped for their task to the

work of formulating a theology native to the country is in its initial stages.

In the presentation of its message which forms its basic function, a missionary church while it should be concerned with its audience must realize that its very justification is its message. It should certainly take the utmost care to know its audience and see that what it says is understood and accepted ; but it must take still greater care to see that it is saying what it exists to say. A missionary church in diverse parts of the world may perform its function in diverse ways. Its freedom of expression and experiment may be wide. But a missionary church cannot be either missionary or church if it wants to enjoy any freedom from its message.

Recent New Testament scholarship has uncovered the *Kerugma* that lay behind the Apostolic preaching. C. H. Dodd has analyzed the Pauline *Kerugma* which is practically the same as Peter's, into seven constituent elements. We have no complete account of the preaching of all the early disciples in the towns and cities into which they went. But wherever they went it is this *Kerugma* they bore. It is to preach this that they hazarded or lost their lives. To preach about Jesus basically as one whose work consisted in what He taught about God, about spiritual life and love is not to preach the Christianity of the Church. To preach anything one likes about Christ is not Christianity. P. T. Forsyth has said that it is not simple historical facts that constitute Christianity but a certain interpretation about them. The *Kerugma* is largely an interpretation. The early Church interpreted the life, death and resurrection of a person in a particular way. That was its message. That has always remained the message of the Church.

The task of a theologian in India is neither that of a mere combination of Christian and Indian elements at discretion nor that of attempting to reconcile the Christian faith with any other religious faith. A combination of certain Christian elements with certain elements borrowed locally more or less according to individual whims, with a view to producing an Indian Christian theology, will hardly be more significant than the effort of the gentleman in *Pickwick Papers* who wanted to write on Chinese metaphysics after having read up the articles on China and metaphysics. The reconciliation of one system with another is easy or difficult according to the elements chosen. Nothing is easier than reconciling Christianity with a number of other systems of thought, provided one leaves out what the church set out to say.

Though the church everywhere and always has the mission of proclaiming its message, it takes the specific name of missionary church when it is in an area where its message is not already accepted. The task of a theologian in a missionary church is the expression of its message, not indeed in terms congenial to the modes of thought and concepts current in the environment, but in relation to them and against their background. He is not free to find a message that will in his opinion be more acceptable in the environment. That message is given. Theology will begin to glow only when it is seriously convinced that it is the one worth-while message in the world.