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HOW RELATIVE SHOULD THEOLOGY BE?

In this short article I want to take the opportunity to respond to the stimulating and provocative article by Christopher J. Ellis in the *Baptist Quarterly* issue of April 1981.¹ I should make clear that the author and I would agree on many points raised therein, and that I find the general tenor of his approach quite proper - indeed, "liberating". However, I wish to express one or two reservations of detail, in the hope that the issues will be given greater clarification.

Allow me to begin by specifying some of my points of agreement with the author. Surely all must agree that theological emphasis is dictated (at least partially) by the questions which arise from one's situation: theological thinking is related, or "relative", to one's concerns and needs. Furthermore, I would certainly not wish to deny that the western theological enterprise has often been imperialistic in nature, and has too often exported western cultural concerns and its theological formulae as absolutes, appropriate for all. Also, it seems to me necessary to agree with the statement that the baptismal question is often raised without a common sense of where the answer is to be found, i.e. common to both disputants. Related to this, we must accept that the Scripture/Tradition distinction is by no means as clear-cut as many Protestants have for so long insisted. With these and other points we agree. And yet it is precisely at these points that overstatement or lack of clarity leads to the possibility of real problems. We turn, now, to explore my reservations.

I. The insistence that "theological and liturgical practices are *determined* by cultural context" may be construed as making a virtue of necessity.² Of course we get answers to the questions we choose to ask, and the questions are largely given to us by our milieu. But is such an assertion normative or descriptive in nature? I suggest that while our "question and answer" are inevitably situation-rooted, and while we should strive to be relevant to our brother's plight, this does not mean that theology and liturgy should always be determined by cultural contexts. It must be stressed that "engagement" is always and only a *critical* engagement: addressing and criticizing the culture, introducing elements creatively from other cultures, giving a critique of the secular critique (as it were) in any theological environment, and attempting to shed light on one's situation as seen from the perspective above all relativities - God's! God's questions to us, and to our situation, may not be the ones which come to us most naturally. We must applaud and encourage the theologians of the Third World as they "engage", but we in the west often "sell out" to our culture - what guarantees the integrity of their theological reflection and assertion? There is much to be gained, I would conjecture, not only by (for instance) Third World theologians offering a critique of our poor efforts, but by our reciprocity in similar vein. When this dialogue gets into full swing then theology might come closer to a form which is at once culturally relevant, and yet not culturally "determined".

II. Another issue has already been touched on here. Pluralism and relativity may well indeed be "facts of life",³ but this does not mean that they are to be welcomed and embraced uncritically. The Christian pluralist recognises that others' beliefs *might* be valid, but sees that they are not so by definition! A theology which affirms relativism with enthusiasm always runs the risk of becoming uncritical. Our author hints at this when he says that we should not give "an imprimatur to all claims of validity for all shades of baptismal practice, for theological development and contextualisation *must remain in touch with the Christ who is proclaimed.*"⁴ Quite so. But this principle needs further examination and extrapolation: only then will we see the proper limit of theological relativity. The "Christ who is proclaimed" is the problem at the heart of the issue. "Relative theology" is relative to its context, but must be more firmly and irrevocably related to Christ: the controlling interest is Christ, not context.

Examples of the dangers of an uncritical relative theology are legion, and some are suggested in the article under scrutiny. We are told that because God is creator of all things, Asian theologians evaluate Buddhism and Hinduism positively. Such an evaluation is, in this bare form, somewhat hasty. Are we to say the same for monetarism, sectarianism, and other "isms" which come under the heading of "all things" for which God might be held ultimately responsible? Clearly not, as Mr Ellis realises. Implicit in his article is some criterion that hovers above the relativities - the Christ who is proclaimed. All claims for value, in terms of Christian theology, must be scrutinised from this angle. The article sometimes appears to give the green light to all who make vigorous claims to authentic Christian experience. Yet I feel sure that Mr Ellis would want to take issue with Moonies and Mormons, if not with Methodists. If we grant that this is so, then even "relative theologians" must wrestle more desperately with this central, axiomatic Christ.

When we make clear this guiding force in our theological commitments, then some supposed differences, diversities and relativities are shown not to be real differences at all. What links Korea with Latin America⁵ is that, despite different situations, they have recourse to the same Word for their "solutions": the Christ who is proclaimed. Micah, Amos, Isaiah, Exodus-Liberation themes, are all aspects of the one truth, the one Christ proclaimed. The differences are of stress, not substance. This is why it is misleading to invoke the "dialectic of contradiction".⁶

Two genuinely contradictory statements do not become sensible because enunciated by a theologian. We too often baptise our contradictions and call them paradoxes. Dialectical theology does not deal with true contradictions, for the two terms predicated are used in different ways in the two statements held in tension.⁷ They do not, thus, contradict, but correct each other; they shed light on their subject from different angles.

The methodological point has bearings for two problems raised in this article: firstly, the theologians of Korea, Asia, Latin America, and the west *may* be contradictory, but if they are they are not all true (or, if you prefer, truly witnessing to the Christ) - they are so only if dialectical; secondly, the application of such methods to the ecumenical debate is somewhat fraught - two definitions of baptism may only live together if dialectical rather than contradictory, i.e. only if they are in fact defining two different things. This distinction may in fact prove helpful for, as Mr Ellis shows us, Baptists and paedo-Baptists usually have two very different things in mind when they talk of baptism.⁸

All of these considerations suggest that the expression "relative theology" may be misleading in its connotation. Perhaps "situation theology" is a better term? Just as the situation ethicist seeks to ask "What does love demand in this situation?", so the situation theologian might ask "What does the Christ whom we proclaim say in this situation?", though he is always aware that it is the same Christ who says other things in other situations. If the world alone sets the agenda, then we are likely to get on to the wrong track sooner rather than later. Barth is referred to with approval in this article: I cannot think that he would approve this aspect of relative theology.

III. Moving on to the baptismal issue, the first misgiving is a general one. Context produces theology and practice, and theology and practice are judged according to context. But before we move from a convincing demonstration of contextualisation amongst foreign theologies, to the application of this principle to our home denominationalism, we need to note a fundamental difference. The contexts which produce theologies in the U.K., and the Third World, are genuinely "over against" the Church which reflects theologically. But in our home situation the context (say, of baptism) precisely *is* the practice and theology which rationalises or motivates it. The context of baptist or paedo-baptist practice is not over against the Church in the same sense as its social environment is over against it, but only in the sense that our past is over against us. Experience is produced by the practice, which then requires a theology to undergird it, which then issues in a practice, and so on. One can appeal to varying social contexts to justify varying theological emphases, but not so easily to varying church practices to *justify* varying church practices! The argument is circular: not vicious, merely unproductive.

IV. Finally, we do not want to take the author to task for omitting topics properly beyond the scope of his essay, but a further probe in one or two areas may be fruitful. He convincingly shows us that there is perhaps more to be said for the paedo-Baptist line than Baptists often credit. But apart from offering food for thought, attempts must be made at digestion. We are told not to assume that first-century practice necessarily suits twentieth-century life. This is a very fair

point, but its broader implications need discussion. Just as one must not absolutize first-century practice (Scripture), so neither must one absolutize the practice of the following nineteen centuries (Tradition). What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. It is very well to insist that Scripture should not be rigidified, but we must look carefully: do we need no continuity with New Testament beliefs and practice? Clearly some continuity is essential: Tradition would have no validity but for its claim to continuity. If we argue, as I think probably correctly, that we must be continuous with the inner impetus of New Testament thought and life (the Christ who is proclaimed), rather than to the concrete form in which that impetus came to be expressed, then there must be much work on what this means: on how such a criterion of continuity is to be applied. It cannot be left totally vague and undefined. The question which confronts the British churches then will be, which understanding of baptism is the most telling tool for mission in our cultural context, and which will deepen the faith of the people of God who must witness in it? The baptismal question is not one to be dealt with solely by seeing value for the inner life of the Church, for such privacy is not a luxury given to it. The important context which we need to consider is not the denominational one, which differs from one group to another, but the context in which each congregation must carry on its mission to the glory of God.

Many (non-Baptist) scholars agree that paedo-Baptism is something, and something with some value, but that it is not what the New Testament means by "baptism".⁹ Should another word be used? In examining the suitability of various early Christian symbols for our age and culture, it may well be that the "magical" christening is much less helpful than the commitment to discipleship in believers' baptism. The very problems faced by so many paedo-baptists because of society's demands to "have the baby done" have brought many difficulties to the surface. One of these is that, in the case of those clerics most widely approved by church bodies, not all children are "done" - only those of Church lineage. While we see the motive for such a restriction, it undercuts in a fundamental way the claim that the sacrament shows forth the "absolute gratuity" of God's grace!¹⁰ Any resolution of the baptismal question will need to be continuous with Scripture and Tradition in some way, and it must above all be effective as a Christian symbol in our own missionfield: it is at this point, perhaps, leaving aside any appeal to the past, that paedo-baptism seems very weak.

The aim of this brief response has not been to slip into pro-Baptist invective, but to applaud an "open" and contextual approach to theology as exemplified in Christopher Ellis's article. But we have also tried to note the dangers inherent in such an approach, and have warned of the limitations of relevance of a "relative theology" for the baptismal question confronting our British churches. Nevertheless, we must be assured, an answer lies only in dialogue and self-criticism, and not in any siege mentality of jealous absolutism.

NOTES

- 1 "Relativity, Ecumenism and the Liberation of the Church.
- 2 Ibid., p.81.
- 3 Ibid., p.81.
- 4 Ibid., p.87, emphases mine.
- 5 Ibid., pp.82 f.
- 6 Ibid., p.85.
- 7 A very good example of this is afforded by the (in)famous polarities of Alfred North Whitehead in his book, *Process and Reality* (CUP, Cambridge, 1929), p.492. Many of his critics have seized upon these, as a stick with which to beat him: their attitude shows a simplistic lack of understanding, both of Whitehead's whole corpus, and the way in which language is used of God.
- 8 Ellis, op.cit., pp.86 ff.
- 9 A recent, and worthwhile, example being James D. G. Dunn's excellent *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (SCM, London, 1981), pp.152-161, esp. pp.160 f.
- 10 Ellis, op.cit., p.89.

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