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THE RELEVANCE OF THEOLOGY TO THE WORK OF THE MINISTRY

IT MIGHT SEEM almost irrelevant to write on this subject were it not for the lamentable tendency, so often apparent, to drive a false distinction between our doctrine and our devotion, between our theology and our practice. Nor is it unusual to hear ministers of the gospel announce from the pulpit, in a way which seems to imply that there is something commendable in the fact, that they are not theologians. Indeed, so much has this hiatus been allowed to develop, that now the very word 'theologian' seems to conjure up pictures of an academic theologian, or teacher in a theological college. Of course there is a need for such specialists, but there is an equally great need for all Christians, and in particular all ministers, to be theologians. The contrast between the state of affairs today and that in former generations is a marked one. In Christian homes in the past Owen, Charnock and other of the great divines of the seventeenth century were read with understanding and spiritual profit. But in these days there is a dearth of solid reading and thinking. It is true that theology can become merely academic and intellectual, but to stop the stultifying effect of a barren theology we have ceased to study theology in any real way at all.

What is theology?

It has been described as 'the science of God', a field of study in which we consider God's revelation of His Person and His redemptive activity towards men. Some, objecting to such a pursuit, have argued that we should take the plain Scriptures, unsystematized. Theologians, they reason, have made the Scriptures lifeless by seeking to force them into theological patterns to which they were never intended to correspond. It is a sufficient answer to such people to point to the cults and sects which, claiming to follow 'the straightforward approach to Scripture', arrive at so many unscriptural conclusions. The obvious need then for the study of theology arises from the fact that if we neglect it we lose all our perspective and lead ourselves into misinterpretation.

Now it has been customary to divide theological study into various disciplines and we must look at some of these.

1. *Biblical Theology.* The phrase is not a happy one since all theology ought to be, and all true theology is, biblical. Geerhardus Vos preferred to speak of 'the history of Special Revelation', and in these words he was describing the study of the process of God's revelation, for when we come to Scripture we seek to see it as a developing organism in which God progressively unfolds His purposes. A true grasp of this will enable us to see something of the relation of the different parts of Scripture to the whole, and a proper use of this discipline will correct, for example, a wrong attitude among Evangelicals to the Old Testament. Too frequently we either neglect it or allegorize it, and instead of regarding it as a revelation from God we treat it as a peg on which to hang all kinds of incredible theories. Biblical Theology will correct this neglect or misuse.

2. *Dogmatic or Systematic Theology.* It is by means of this discipline that we aim to see the interrelation of the parts of God's revelation, their logical as opposed to their historical connection. Of course it is frequently objected that when we systematize Scripture we slip into philosophy, vain speculation and barren discussion. Again, this is a possible but not a necessary consequence of the study. The true systematic theologian is not a philosopher but primarily a disciple. Unlike the philosopher who seeks to square scriptural data with his own preconceptions, the biblical dogmatician seeks only to make explicit what is already implicit in Scripture. For example, in my preaching early in my ministry I was floundering in the Scriptures. They did not seem to fit together, and thus confusion was reflected in my preaching. It was only when I began to understand the nature of the Covenant that I got an idea of the whole. Now the lesson of this is as obvious as it is important. We must preach against the background of the total view of Scripture, 'rightly dividing the word of truth', else we will bewilder and confuse our people with unbiblical and illogical contradictions.

3. *Historical Theology.* Probably owing to our regard for the supreme and final authority of the Scriptures, Evangelicals have been dubious of the value of this study. We are doubtful of appeals being made to any source other than the Scriptures. But while it is true that this is as it should be, we must remember that we do not come as isolated individuals but as members of the body of Christ when we seek to understand God's truth. The right of private judgment does not include license. If we are members of the body of Christ then this includes earlier ages as well. We have a heritage in the past and we must not despise what men of God have said in interpreting the Word of God. Looking over the centuries of Christian history we can see that God has led His Church to a deeper understanding of various truths at various points in the course of history. For example, in the time of the Arian controversy the Church was led to a clearer understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. Then the Chalcedonian Definition gave us a clear statement of the doctrine of the Person of Christ. Again in the sixteenth century Luther reaffirmed the doctrine of justification by faith with a clarity that had been well-nigh obscured down through the Middle Ages. Thus in our theological enquiry we do not start *de novo*. The errors and mistakes of the past reappear today, and although they may seem new we must realize that frequently they are the errors and mistakes of antiquity.

With this current tendency to ignore the past goes the fashion of believing unquestioningly what is generally accepted by present-day evangelical Christians. Indeed to question this seems to be tantamount to questioning the very truth of Christianity itself. And so it is that we regard old truths as new heresies, things to be regarded as dangerous rather than to be held as precious. It is at this point that Historical Theology is of such great value, and many who enter the ministry are ignorant just here. Too often our normative historical theology is that of the last sixty to seventy years instead of the last 2,000. So, then, a right historical perspective will be invaluable in that it will aid us to avoid the errors and to follow the truth of our predecessors.

4. *Pastoral or Practical Theology.* It is typical that this has tended to be called 'Pastoralia' — a title smacking of techniques and methods. This is unfortunate since in many ways Pastoral Theology is the most important division of our theological study, for it represents the practical outworking and direct application of our theological principles in pastoral practice in the local church. These principles are of supreme relevance to our personal life and the life of the church. If you have an unbalanced diet then you suffer for it, and too many Christians today are the victims of spiritual malnutrition on the one hand, and of spiritual obesity on the other. To illustrate, in Christian conduct we do not want to find ourselves in legalism, and yet in our efforts to avoid this we swing over into antinomianism. The whole question of the relation of law and gospel and the place of the law in the life of the Christian is one on which instruction is sorely needed in many evangelical circles. But this is an aspect of Pastoral Theology.

In church life then our theology must have a direct bearing on our pastoral practice. We ought not to allow psychology to usurp its place, but beginning with God and God's revealed truth then we must work that out in our daily practice. Many aspects of life in the local church will be affected by it. Let us consider just two: our approach to worship and the preaching of the Word.

i. *Worship.* There are two widely-accepted approaches to the question of worship. That which holds that we should make our worship attractive to the outsider who is unimpressed by holiness, and a second, and somewhat higher view, which stresses that worship should be helpful to the Christian as he comes from the difficulties of the past week with a consequent need to be strengthened and helped.

But surely the main thought in our minds should be God, and the question we should pose ourselves is whether or not our worship is acceptable to Him. Is our worship biblical? If so, it will be helpful. But in order that our worship be biblical it must be set against the total pattern of Scripture. First of all, against the doctrine of God to be found there. Our worship must reflect His righteousness, holiness and purity. We will come boldly, but to One who is on a throne, and so we will approach Him with a sense of awe and reverence which will be apparent in our worship. Here it must be said that our rallies and similar meetings often fail badly in this respect.

Again, our doctrine of man will be relevant. It is not that he is out of touch with God and needs only a reknitting of the bond again. His very nature is wrong, not just his relationship to God, and it needs a work of God to remedy it.

Then we must remember that the believer still has the old nature within him, so that his worship is always liable to be perverted in carnal ways. As a result constant scrutiny of the externals of our worship is necessary in order to see what they will evoke. We must learn to be careful of our emphasis on the externals, since the more you emphasize them, the more you are likely to get an aesthetic response to an atmosphere. This question of atmosphere often receives a dangerous emphasis in that before we preach we condition the hearers. In this way our worship becomes man-directed and not God-directed. It is nothing more than an assault on people's minds under the alleged banner of the Holy Spirit, and as such it is wrong.

ii. *The Preaching of the Word.* Today the ministry of the Word has fallen on evil days. There is a constant appeal made for brighter, shorter services and shorter sermons which are to be 'practical' and lacking in doctrine. The result is some of the pitiful homilies we get on broadcast services. What is needed is a returning to theological doctrinal preaching, not great hunks of undigested divinity, but preaching which emerges from a solid apprehension and application of divine truth. This will come only when we have authority and depth. The 'thus saith the Lord' of the Old Testament prophets has vanished in favour of a tentative and apologetic advancing of man's opinions. And to speak with authority we must have a wide grasp of Scripture and its doctrine. If our preaching is to have depth as well, then it must cease being a series of blessed thoughts and begin to be an exposition of the Word of God. Our text will be dealt with as an organic part of the whole, and will require an understanding of the whole if it is to be understood itself. There is too much repetition of stereotyped formulae about our pulpit utterances. True, we have one theme, Jesus Christ and Him crucified, but God forgive us if we make this monotonous when there is all the wealth and variety of Scripture at our disposal which it is our duty to bring to our people.

The polemic element will not be absent if we are preaching the gospel positively and resisting error. Now this is not popular. We live in an ecumenical age which has influenced many people's thinking. 'Various insights' have replaced truth and error. Liberal, Catholic and Evangelical all have their 'contribution' to make, it is argued; but any of them on its own is narrow. Correspondingly the reaction has proceeded against the concept of propositional theology since we are told that 'truth defies definition'. This view seems to be far removed from the New Testament view which regards truth not merely as an insight but as something which stands over against error. But when we have said this let us remember that in the New Testament there was a clear distinction between the enemy of the gospel and Christians who are in error. In these days, however, controversy is looked on askance. The one thing we must not do is to rebuke error. But as we have seen it is our duty to do so. Now, clearly, to engage in such a ministry we must have our own position thought out, as well as understanding what it is we are attacking. Nothing is more futile than misdirected polemic.

It would be pointless to disguise the fact that in evangelical circles there is a marked difference of opinion on the question of evangelism. As a preliminary caution let us note that we must take great care that we do not unchurch one another over this point. But at the same time we must recognize that our differences are not based on techniques and practices but on theology, and so it is essential that we think out the doctrinal pre-suppositions on which the differences are based. It is only in this way that we will understand, and be sympathetic towards those with whom we disagree. There are two basic starting-points. Firstly, that which believes that, since man is free to respond to or reject the gospel, any means which are legitimate should be used to this end. Secondly, there is the approach which recognizes God's sovereignty, seeing that it is God's work by His Spirit to lead a man to faith in Christ. Always we must think primarily in terms of being faithful to God, and we must remember that we are both trying to be faithful.

It might appear to be almost on the level of bathos to descend now to questions involved in the ordinary running of a parish — women's meetings, the Sunday School, methods of raising money, church councils or diaconates.

At this level the theologian often becomes a mere administrator. But we should be seeking to relate biblical truth to the practical situations in which we are involved just as much as in the apparently more elevated matters. We will need to have our position thought out in advance if we are entering the ministry. Plausible arguments must be examined in the light of Scripture and judged accordingly. Always we remember that essentially the church is a spiritual agency and this conception must govern our mode of approach. We will not argue from a situation but proceed from basic truths to this particular circumstance.

In all that I have said, my main point has been that our theology is not an academic, intellectual pursuit, stimulating, no doubt, but divorced from practice, whether in terms of personal living or pastoral experience. Both are indissolubly linked, and both will suffer if they are separated. James Denney once said that all our theologians should be evangelists, and all our evangelists theologians. Let me end by modifying this, and saying that all our theologians should be pastors and all our pastors theologians.

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