

Editorial

THE INESCAPABLENESS OF THEOLOGY

WE are told on good authority that religious interest on this continent has reached an all time high. In the United States 60 percent of the population, or in all, 95 million persons, are members of some religious institution. Hundreds of millions of dollars are being spent each year on new churches and on the enlargement of older churches. More people are going to church than ever before. How curious it is then that journals of theology should have such a struggle to live and that theological books which offer a serious discussion of important aspects of the Christian faith should have such a meagre circulation! One hundred million church members on this continent, more than a half million Christians engaged in special ministries, and yet no journal of theology has more than 5000 subscribers and few even of the most readable theological books reach a circulation of more than 10,000! It is apparent that, even for a large portion of the clergy, interest in the Christian religion and in the church does not extend to an interest in theology.

This is both curious and significant because no Christian—and least of all a clergyman—can escape being a theologian. He may be a confused theologian. He may be an unconscious and irresponsible theologian. He may be an uninformed and naive theologian. But he cannot be a Christian and not have a theology of some kind.

There are three levels on which we live our life. The surface level is that of feeling and action. Below that is the level of thought and conviction. But deeper still is the secret place where we are what we are. Some people live most of the time on the surface level, being propelled into certain lines of conduct by the way they feel about themselves and things and people, and relatively unconscious of the deeper roots out of which their feelings and actions arise. But the roots are there. Their life on the surface is the outcome of the convictions concerning God, the world, themselves and their fellowmen that through various influences have been formed in them on the deeper level. No man can escape thinking, and thinking to a conclusion that issues in action, on the central questions of existence. These questions are theological questions and when he thinks about them he is a theologian.

It is hard to understand how anyone who ever has to speak on behalf of the Christian faith can avoid being driven to serious theological study. It is an awesome responsibility, to undertake to speak the word of God's truth to our fellowmen, a word that has in it for them infinite possibilities of life—or of death. It is so easy for us to be betrayed by our human weakness and ignorance, more particularly by our involvement in a sinful humanity

and a sinful society, into mingling a large measure of our own falsehoods with God's truth. Who that has a sensitive conscience can fail to be plagued with the question "Was it really God's truth that I spoke?" God intends us to face that question honestly, and, when we do, bringing our message to the test of whether or not it has in it the same truth of God that is revealed in the Scriptures, we find ourselves engaged in a difficult theological investigation in which we are glad to have the help of more experienced theologians of past and present.

Are we to deduce from the fact that so few even of the ministers of our churches interest themselves in theology that they are not yet sensitive in conscience to the question of truth or falsehood in regard to their own message and principles? Perhaps they have found a way to assure themselves of their soundness without inquiring too deeply into the validity of their theology. They have found some theologian who impresses them as so thoroughly Christian that they can share his soundness by taking over their views ready-made from him, thereby rendering unnecessary any extensive studies of their own. They may not know it themselves but others can recognize in the character of their preaching, and of their witness in general, that they have not yet begun to take seriously their theological responsibility, for convictions and beliefs taken over ready-made from some other quarter have always in them the quality of the second-hand and never the ring of personal first-hand knowledge.

The neglect of theology—which is the neglect of thinking—in our modern Protestant Christianity is one of its most serious weaknesses. It is in part the consequence of an impatience with theological distinctions. It has seemed to be more generous and tolerant to assure Christians that their differences in belief are of no great importance, that the Church is large enough to take in all who in the broadest sense acknowledge a loyalty to Jesus Christ. But soon that tolerance goes one stage farther and we begin to hear that any religion is good so long as one is in earnest about it. How deluded then Jesus must have been not to recognize the adequacy of the earnest religion and moral concern of his fellow-countrymen!

Also our engrossment in the practical has contributed to the neglect of theology. Action has been the watchword of our time, missionary action, social action, militant action for the strengthening of the church's external structure. It is not over-critical to quote the typical modern churchman as saying: "Give me something Christian to do but do not ask me to think."

But today it is dawning upon thoughtful men that the character of our actions is determined by the character of our thinking, that a false theology leads to a false way of life, and that you do not touch a church's or a nation's vital heart until you get down to the levels of thinking and being. All the problems of our existence are at their base theological, and there are no solutions until on these deeper levels we know the truth which was incarnate in Jesus Christ and which alone has power to set us free.

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