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Systematic Theology and Preaching

WILFRED SCOPES

(A paper read at the B.D. Teachers' Conference at Jabalpur in
December 1956)

While the immediate purpose of the study of systematic theology is to enable the student to understand the faith, to grasp with conscience and reason the essential content of Christianity and attain to intellectual integrity as a Christian, this purpose is but part of the larger one in ministerial training, viz. to equip the student for his vocation and enable him to present to individuals and society the challenge of the Word of God in the context of today.

A THEOLOGY FOR TODAY

In the course of his study he learns that the presentation of truth for 2,000 years has been influenced by the needs and thought forms of society in each succeeding age. He comes to recognize that any proclamation of the Christian faith must fit the historic situation today if it is to make sense in any deep way to his contemporaries.

Sermons of the great Christian preachers are inevitably dated. Take for example John Wesley. He lived in an age of rationalism. True he preached the perennial gospel of a personal, loving, redeeming, sanctifying God, but he spoke to his age in a vocabulary they knew and in a way which, permeated as they were with their rationalistic world view, opened them up to Him for whom they had been looking.

But this is not eighteenth century England. This is twentieth century India—a free India—a land being rapidly transformed by new ideologies and new techniques, and we are called upon to recognize this. Not that we can favour 'situational preaching' which tries to find its answers in the situations, e.g. in moral platitudes, keys to success or the latest discoveries of psychiatry. Answers must come out of what happens when the situation is confronted by the event of Christ.

BULTMANN'S PLEA

In recent days a theologian who has created quite a stir in theological circles is Rudolph Bultmann who rightly claims that a man is always a man of his time whose needs are prompted by his historical situation. In his concern to demythologize the gospel he wants to make it possible for the modern preacher to convey the gospel intelligibly to his contemporaries. Bultmann points out that the cosmology of the N.T. is quite unacceptable to modern man, with its three-storied universe consisting of heaven above, the abode of God and of celestial beings; of hell below, the underworld or place of torment; and of earth in the middle, the scene of the supernatural activity of God and Satan. Nor should we be bothered with contemporary Jewish apocalypticism. All our thinking, he says, is shaped for good or ill by modern science, and thus any blind acceptance of the thought forms of the N.T. is quite unacceptable. Whatever may be Bultmann's excesses in his zeal for a new interpretation of N.T. mythology, we agree that the question must be faced, 'How do we preach an ancient gospel to a modern man? How can one translate a message couched in the terms and thought patterns of the first century into language that is meaningful to modern India?'

From this arise two important considerations:

1. Our theology must be up to date.
2. We must be conversant with our own historical situation.

The two are of course inter-related, because any up-to-date theology must take cognizance of current thought coming out of our historical situation, for example the renaissance of Hinduism and Buddhism, the dangers of syncretism and the presuppositions of Communism.

WANTED—CREATIVE ASIAN THINKING

It is not sufficient that our grasp of Western theology is up to date. All of us are conscious that already the theology we teach is too heavily weighted by Western thought because those who teach are either Westerners or have been trained in the Western system.

Winburn Thomas in a recent article entitled 'Teaching Theology in Asia' remarks: 'The hand of the missionary past lays nowhere in South-East Asia and the Far East more heavily than upon theological education... Thus far most of the theological contributions of Asian Christian scholars have been mere re-writes of Western theology. These scholars in becoming Christian also became denationalized... The theological system taught in Western texts is rooted in Western Church history. Each system is an outgrowth of cultural and sociological factors in the respective environments. In the Philippines, American professors or American-trained Filipinos teach the prevailing

American theologies. In India the British do likewise. In Indonesia, Europeans coach from Karl Barth's *Dogmatik*. The proper approach to each of the Asian churches is from the Bible, that its message might speak to their type of situation and experience. Each of the Asian peoples is at some stage of development described in the Old Testament... It might be possible to begin where they are in terms of their own religious development, and lead them to the New Testament. The sooner these expositions can be made by Asians trained in Asia, the sooner the dogmatic accent will be comprehensible to the people.'

It is good that active steps are being taken to establish the centre for research under the leadership of Dr. P. D. Devanandan. We hope that through this centre there may be established continuity with the past, with the treasures of the ecumenical Church, and with India's rich religious heritage; we hope also that there will emerge creative theological thinking related to today and tomorrow.

ACQUAINTANCE WITH CONTEMPORARY SITUATIONS

But if it is important to teach a Christian theology to our students which represents the best theological thinking of the twentieth century in Asia as well as the West, it is equally necessary that the students should know their own historical situation, for how can the Christian message be related to what is unknown? The really intelligent student of course will seek to keep himself informed of what is happening in his country and in the wider world, but I have often felt that we fail to give enough place to responsible discussion of current issues in our colleges. Could there not be at least a weekly seminar for staff and students, each in turn being asked to introduce current topics for responsible debate?

THE THREEFOLD VOCATION

We cannot remind ourselves too often that the ministerial vocation is a threefold one, of prophet and king (leader) as well as priest. It is here that official representatives of our religion differ so sharply from those of non-Christian faiths. A short time ago a friend of mine on a visit to the famous Madura temple in South India managed with difficulty to secure an interview with the Chief Priest. He found that he was a man of very modest education who could speak only Tamil. Since the office was hereditary he had been trained by his father in the intricacies of the prescribed rituals, but made no pretence of knowledge of Hindu philosophy or the message of Hinduism to modern India. Doubtless in the history of the Christian Church there have been illiterate priests, but those days are past. The Christian priest must also be a prophet and a leader.

STUDY AND PREACHING

One weakness in our present system of theological education is that it is inevitably departmentalized, and there is never time for the student to integrate fully what he has learned into a complete system of thought. He attends classes in Biblical exposition, systematic theology, Church history, comparative religions, homiletics and the rest of a heavy curriculum, and when he leaves college the various departments of knowledge are still largely unco-ordinated.

Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the weekly sermon class. It is seldom that a student utilizes what he has learned in the various classes. When he prepares his sermon outlines he thinks only in terms of homiletics where certain rules have to be followed, for example, introduction, divisions to main subject, illustrations, conclusion. Often his subject-matter is such that one would never imagine that he has attended other classes. We feel like saying that a layman with no theological background at all could produce a better sermon!

What can we do about it ?

We remind ourselves that all we can hope to do in three or four years is to set the student on the path of theological thinking. We cannot cover the whole text of the Bible in detailed exposition ; we cannot deal with the implication of the Christian faith in all life's situations ; we cannot acquaint him with the entire experience of the Christian Church in two thousand years of history. Our hope and expectation is that he will build on the foundations of scholarship we seek to lay.

Yet surely even before he leaves college the process of co-ordinating the various branches of study should be at least well on its way ; otherwise he will enter upon his work in a state of profound bewilderment. This process can be facilitated in the college workshop of sermon preparation, and I would venture to relate here my own experience at the Andhra Union Theological College, Dornakal.

AN EXPERIMENT IN CO-ORDINATION

Being responsible for the classes both in systematic theology and homiletics it was possible for me to effect some co-ordination. For among the different types to be preached by second and third year students at Dornakal, one type was labelled 'Doctrinal', the purpose being to teach the essentials of the Christian faith in a systematic way through preaching. Thus at the close of each particular section in Theology, for example God, Man, Sin, Salvation, the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, appropriate themes and texts were discussed in the homiletical class, and after selection students were requested to present sermon outlines to be shared with whoever happened to be the next to preach a doctrinal sermon. A good deal of guidance was

needed in the preparation of a final outline which was made available to all the students. Yet they felt that they had a share in it all, and we had reason to believe that the training to simplify Christian doctrine and bring it down to the level of ordinary Christian laymen was of very great value. Before students leave college they ought to have prepared, under supervision, at least one sermon on the great festivals and events of the Christian year, which cover much of the essential Christian doctrine.

POST-GRADUATE TRAINING

In theological education I have always felt that there is a useful threefold parallel in the medical world of the specialist, the general practitioner, and the health-visitor or St. John's ambulance man. In these three fields, despite their obvious disparities, there is a set of fundamental presuppositions which obtain in each field; there is the same modern approach to medical science. In the theological fields we have also the specialists on the one hand with lay preachers on the other, with the ordained pastors in the middle corresponding to the general practitioners in medicine, whose main function is to mediate the Word of God to the common people in practical terms. No medical school of any repute would think of sending out its graduates to minister in public medicine until they have had a period of internship where they learn to apply their training to human physical need under supervision.

In the West, some churches, aware of the need for some similar provision in the ministerial world, have made arrangements, either in the middle of theological training or at its close, for students to secure some practical training under older experienced ministers. It would be more difficult to do the same in India; yet I am sure that effort should be made to do so, even if it means that students are compelled during internship or student pastorates to become 'tent-makers' like St. Paul.

Much can be done for them of course through post-graduate study courses sponsored by the churches. In some instances, for example certain dioceses of the Church of South India, such courses are well conducted over the period of probation for new theological graduates, although more emphasis might be given with profit to the integration of systematic theology and preaching.

SIMPLIFICATION

Something more should be said about the paramount need to simplify theology in preaching. It was Spurgeon who remarked to a group of students, 'Gentlemen, remember that the Lord's instruction to His disciples was "Feed my sheep" and "Feed my lambs". He did not say, "Feed my giraffes!".' Many theological graduates in their early days are tempted to air their new knowledge; in fact this may be regarded as a vocational hazard! Presentation of Christian truth must be simple, both in

content and in language. Simplicity in content does not exclude depth, for the most profound truths can be expressed in easily understood terms.

USE OF MOTHER TONGUE

But as long as students acquire theology through the medium of a language other than their own they will have difficulty in their presentation to their people. How many of our Indian ministers frankly confess that they have learned to think in English, and so are accustomed to preach from English notes. For those who have really mastered the English language there may be no handicap, but I am sure that it is not to be encouraged normally. The average graduate would do better to think in his own mother tongue, and then there will be more chance of his being intelligible to ordinary people.

In all parts of India the regional language is being revitalized and modernized. How far more attractive it is than the usual Christian version where vocabulary is antiquated, stilted, and in many cases incomprehensible outside Christian circles. To mediate Christian truth in any vital way, how necessary it is that our ministers should be thoroughly at home with the new vigorous language of their contemporaries! It is indeed tragic if the years of theological study in English result in creating a language gulf between a minister and his own people.

Considerations such as these have impelled us to strengthen in recent years our L.Th. institutions where instruction is given in the mother tongue, and to look forward to the day when it will be possible to raise them to the B.D. level. That day will remain far off while adequate textbooks are not available in the regional languages. But we cannot deny that true indigenization of the message will only come finally when serious theological thinking and teaching are carried on in the mother tongue. The achievement of this is one of the major challenges facing us in India. The eternal gospel, as Winburn Thomas reminds us, must be proclaimed in the language, thought forms, and concepts of the times which the people recognize as their own.

Finally, our theology and our preaching must be such as to impart to the Church the qualities of true spiritual authority. It must not be afraid to speak to the world and in concrete terms, both in respect of the larger issues of our times, and also on the local levels concerning spiritual and social needs in its immediate surroundings. The Church must speak 'not in a tone of well-meant advice, but with a burning sense of calling, of being overpowered by the Word of God.'

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The call to follow Christ always means a call to share the work of forgiving men their sins. Forgiveness is the Christlike suffering which it is the Christian's duty to bear.

D. BONHOEFFER