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The Need for Basic Theology

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In these days there are many people who are expressing deep concern over the insufficiency of the teaching which has been received by a majority of Indian Christians. This concern is especially felt for village congregations, though like concern is also felt for urban and city congregations. In view of this teaching failure, besides realizing the urgent need of good Christian teaching, we must also ask of what kind this teaching must be. The conviction which will be expressed here is that this teaching must be of a theological kind.

That which many conceive to be theology or theological leads only to bewilderment and confusion amongst not a few, so let us first give a simple and not frightening definition of the word 'theology'. The simple derivative meaning of 'theology' is 'the knowledge (or science) of God'. Now the Christian's understanding of this word is, and must be, moulded by his conception of God. As Christians we do not think of God as purely in Himself and in the abstract, but rather in relation to His creation; for us God is not an indefinite Ultimate unconcerned with this world, but a real and living person vitally concerned with this world, and in particular we believe He has a purpose of love for the human race. This being so, whilst the Christian glories in seeing God as He is in Himself, the Christian also delights in the relationship between God and Man. Therefore the Christian understanding about God involves the purpose of God towards His total creation with a quite special reference to mankind. Accordingly the Christian may take as a definition for the word 'theology': the knowledge and understanding of God, as He is in Himself and as He is in relation to Man and the Universe.

Theology as just defined should plainly be the over-riding concern of every Christian.

It would be fatuous and most terribly wrong—for many reasons which it is not to our purpose to go into here—even to suggest that a majority of Christians have no knowledge of God or relationship with Him, so having no acquaintance with theology as we have defined it. Indeed the very existence of the Church in this and other lands cannot but evoke our wondering praise of Almighty God for the miracle which this truly is. None the less, there can be no denying that in this country the life of the Church and of so many Christians is not what it should be. Such defects

as there are must at root be due to that lack of understanding and need of theology which is spiritual weakness.

What has just been written applies to the Church of Christ in every age and at every place, only the situation for the Church in India is especially difficult. The deadweight in much of Hindu religion and tradition hampers social progress on every front. For the purposes of the Church a deep penetration of the Wisdom and Power of Christ must take place in the hearts and lives of people who have been, and still are, under the environmental influence of the generally sub-Christian philosophy of life, powerfully and broadly grown over thousands of years ; if the Gospel has not penetrated deeply we shall have, as we are already seeing to our sorrow, Hindu attitudes and practices re-emerging amongst Christians from the deeper unpenetrated levels of the mind. This all goes to reinforce the conviction that it is only by bringing to people that theology which brings an attitude to God as known in Christ and a deep all-embracing fellowship with Him, which wins heart, mind and soul and occupies and penetrates the whole of one's being, that the Church will be strengthened as she needs to be and numbers added to her.

Hindu ways, it would be only just to add, are, from a Christian point of view, by no means altogether negative and wrong. There is quite a considerable area in the field of ethics where the requirements of Hindu social custom and religious teaching coincide with the directives of Christian ethics, and on the whole Hindu and Christian together, in like manner, follow these requirements. It is where these moral fields do not coincide that the Christian, under the heavy social pressure of his environment, is inclined to follow the Hindu way and defect from the Christian way. It is in this area of moral choice, we suggest, that attention should be concentrated to find that teaching which is necessary for the Christian in such, never very easy, situations. Therefore we shall select four ways in which the Christian follows his Hindu compatriots to what is grievous failure according to the Christian religion, giving under each head some account of the reason for failure, followed by counsel which may commonly be given in respect of these failures, but counsel not of a basic theological kind, concluding with the kind of basic theology which (from the argument of this article) alone is adequate to the situation.

Let us first consider the general and still common failure in social concern. It can straight away be objected that there is plenty of social concern amongst all, but against such an objection it must be pointed out that this concern in any real and sustained form is limited to the members of one's own community, whereas social concern as understood by the Church, as so well illustrated in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, demands an active and sustained and practical concern for all, whether or not

of one's own community or faith ; such is the Christian requirement of social concern or love of neighbour. Yet so many Christians restrict their real concern and practical love for others to members of their own family or just to fellow-Christians.

The ground for such attitudes is quickly found in traditional Hindu teaching which limits social duty to family and community, and religious duty primarily to one's own individual salvation.

Such attitudes in their restrictedness will be seen by enlightened Christians to be wrong and falling short of that to which we are called. The non-theological counsel given may consist in pointing to the teaching of the Old Testament prophets or our Lord's command that we love our neighbour in the sense that He gave it and illustrated it. This would be an exhortation to follow a teaching, but there is no heart in it without reference to God and His purpose for us. Therefore we must proceed to a theology.

A relevant theological approach here would be the idea of community. God as He is in Himself is a Trinity in intimate relatedness and He calls others into relationship with Himself not just as isolated individuals, but as a community likewise dependent on one another. In our communion with Him and one another our natures become transfused with His nature, so as He moves in love towards all, so do we ; His love is declared to all and our love shows itself likewise.

A second failure in understanding, peculiar to poorer and backward communities, is the conception that theirs is to receive and not to give—anyone the least acquainted with the Church in South India will be familiar with this attitude. In a way this idea is fairly easy to understand in people who have been totally at the mercy of their supposed superiors in society and who have been pitifully dependent, even for the very essentials of life, on the bounty of others. This situation has had the sanction of Hindu religion. What seems most regrettable is that such ideas carry over into the poorer Christians' devotion to God and attitude to the Church, whereby the Lord God is sung of as one who beneficently gives of his great bounty without any reference to service in return, and whereby the Church still tends to be treated by many as a kind of Universal Provider, requiring no provision at all for her all-sufficient self.

It would be inadequate, we suggest, to instruct people simply that they ought to give, or even to say because God has given to them, they ought to give, because to their minds that would not necessarily follow. Again we feel that only an answer that deals with the character of God and our relation to Him will do.

God gave to the uttermost by the sacrifice of His only Son in self-emptying and incarnate suffering. This was done for Man that he, being reconciled to God, might be restored to fellowship and peace with God. A prime issue of this fellowship is our being transformed into His likeness. So we too get the character of a giver. Above all we cannot but give, in response to His love in

dying for us, ourselves and our lives to fulfil His service and pleasure ; and as He gave Himself utterly in love of others, by His changing of us, we do likewise. By union with God we come to resemble Him as sacrificial givers.

The third failure which we shall consider is a particularly sad one ; it is the so general failure to speak the truth of a matter. Often untruth is spoken out of a generous desire to please the person addressed ; more often the lie is spoken to secure a desired benefit. Seeking the source of this practice we may see in the first instance the good feeling for hospitality in India, that guests and close ones of family or faith must be made happy at whatever cost, and in the second case the outworkings of self-concern.

A quick answer for the Christian to the above would be to quote the Eighth Commandment or Matthew 5:37. Such an answer would represent, in effect, a superficial legal approach and not the needful deeper understanding.

The proper theological key here is surely the absolute faithfulness of God, whose Word can be totally trusted, whose promises can be absolutely relied upon. In the Old Covenant spoken through Moses there could never be any failure on God's part, and in the New Covenant, sealed by the blood of Christ the Lord, God is likewise utterly faithful. In the measure that we have truly received Christ, so the Spirit is transforming us to be images of God, whereby we increase in faithfulness both in our part of the Covenant with God and in our words and deeds towards men, receiving the divine character of faithfulness.

Fourthly, there is idolatry amongst Christians, whether of the older kind where Christians consult astrologers, use charms to ward off evil spirits, and seek the assistance of local deities (*see* the Report of the Seminar on Village Religion in South India organized by the C.I.S.R.S. at Bangalore in January 1961) or of the 'newer' kind where Christians put their trust in the material things of this life and in Mammon. The origin of the former is obvious and the latter is a recurring phenomenon of the retreat from the heavenly and intangible to the supposed greater security of reliance on the earthly and tangible.

The Bible has much to say about idolatry. Throughout the history of the People of Israel there is virtually a non-stop battle to preserve the people from idolatry, and in the New Testament there are still the warnings about astrologers and charms and idols and idolatry. However, the purpose of the Bible is not just to warn us away from such evil practices, but rather to preserve for us an understanding of God and His calling of us.

Our scriptures give a basis for God's call to loyalty, and express the motive for those who follow the call. The basis of God's call to Man is the Love of God. In the Old Testament this love is seen above all in the Lord God's choosing to call to Himself the least of peoples who were hopelessly (by all human standards) oppressed ; the Old Testament never ceases to look back to this miraculous deliverance from Egypt. This unique love of God is

seen finally expressed in the pages of the New Testament where God is recorded as coming in His own person and dying for worthless sinners (1); through Christ the greatest deliverance is afforded to all, a deliverance of final and eternal consequence, a deliverance from sin and death itself ! ' The motive of those who respond to this Act of God in Christ can only be one thing, the response of love for love, the poor answer of our human love for that amazing divine love !

It is the Almighty and only God who offers all His powers to us. How can we trust in any other, seeing that by the Cross He has conquered, once for all, all the powers of darkness and every evil thing and only waits for us to share His victory now and for all eternity !

The Christian message is the greatest. How the God of Heaven and the Lord of the Universe acted on the stage of history to rescue a slave race of no human account, how He preserved His love with patience and long suffering for a continually back-sliding people, how at the time appointed He appeared in person on this earth to bear every suffering and degradation that His love might avail for all the sons of men, that all might in communion with Him and one another share His eternal life. The basic teaching for the Christian and for every man is and must be of a theological kind, to do with the very nature of God and His Purpose of Love for Man.

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