

The Teaching of Practical Theology in the Indian Context

ABRAHAM KURUVILLA*

Introduction

Practical theology has been a neglected field in the colleges affiliated to Serampore till very recently. The fact that the first batch of M.Th. (Ministry) candidates completed their degree under the Senate of Serampore only three years back shows that the thought of equipping this branch with competent teachers occurred very late as compared with other theological disciplines. Certainly it is better to be late than never. Therefore the attention which practical theology is gaining these days is a matter for rejoicing.

When we think of proper teaching of practical theology in the Indian context our attention needs to be directed along three paths: (1) the redefining of the scope of practical theology so as to include the study of sociology, psychology and allied subjects; (2) the giving of adequate thought to the development of the personality of those under training; (3) the inducing of new vigour into the teaching of subjects traditionally grouped under pastoralia.

I Redefining the Scope of Practical Theology

Worship, homiletics, Christian education are among the subjects which fall traditionally under pastoralia. It was rather naively assumed that effective preaching would result from a study of the Bible coupled with a few skills in preaching. Christian education was thought of more in terms of Sunday School teaching and familiarising the laity with the elements of Christian doctrine. Study of worship also was considered to consist of an introduction to the elements of worship and some study of the historical development of liturgical forms. The general introversion in theological thinking was reflected in the teaching of pastoralia also. The importance of the study of human existence both in its personal and corporate dimensions was more or less ignored. The recent insight that Christian ministry in the world cannot be accomplished without a study of society and social processes has not yet been adequately reflected in the training of Christian ministers.

Opinion is likely to vary, even among those who are in favour of the inclusion of sociological and psychological subjects in the B.D.

* The Revd. A. Kuruvilla teaches Practical Theology at Mar Thoma Theological Seminary, Kottayam.

curriculum, as to whether these should form part of practical theology. I am strongly in favour of keeping the study of sociology and psychology as part of practical theology as it is only the teachers of practical theology who are likely to bring these new perspectives into the teaching of homiletics, worship and Christian education.

It is not merely enough that social processes at the macro and micro levels need to be taught and learned, but the way in which the teaching-learning process happens is of the greatest importance. The curse of Indian education is that it transfers a lot of "knowledge" to the student without enabling him to have power to apply this in practical life. True education should be a tool enabling the student to have dominion over the world. When this goal is not achieved, learning becomes a burden and education an exercise in futility. The way out is to have the teaching-learning process rooted in life situations. This insight is to be fully utilised in the teaching of sociological and psychological subjects. The study of society and social processes is to be carried out through involvement in society. It is imperative, then, that each theological college should devise ways which provide opportunities to students for social involvement. This will provide the student an opportunity to encounter social processes and to be familiar with laws governing the operation of social processes. In addition the student also will get an opportunity to encounter the forces of destruction and corruption as well as the redemptive forces in society. Such an encounter is necessary to equip the student to be a facilitator of social change which will be a sign of the reign of the crucified and risen Lord in history.

Currently in several of the theological colleges there are at least minimal facilities for students to be involved in social life. A mere increasing of such opportunities will not suffice. The teachers of practical theology and students need to reflect together on the meaning of their experience for Christian ministry. It is necessary, then, that teachers of practical theology be actively involved in society and possess the necessary competence to encourage such reflection.

II Personality Development of the Student

Enabling students to acquire relevant skills for Christian ministry is not adequate. The skills become really useful only when integrated harmoniously as a part of the personality of the student. If new concepts and skills stand in conflict with the personality of the student it will only create problems for the person and his ministry. Therefore, a healthy growth of the personality of the student both at the inter-personal and intra-personal levels is necessary in the training of the young minister. It is at this point that the study of psychology becomes a handy tool in the training of ministers. Again, the study of psychology needs to be therapeutic in its effect on the student. When study becomes a process of self-discovery for the student at intra-personal and inter-personal levels it can be very exciting. Very often there will be personality factors which are a hindrance to the assimilation of new ideas about Christian ministry. Thrusting new

ideas on the students will only increase their inner tension and paralyse them, whereas a caring and permissive atmosphere, coupled with tools for self-awareness, will help the student towards greater personal integration and autonomy. When this is achieved the student will be inwardly mobilised to search and discover the meaning of ministry in the light of contemporary trends and assimilate new ideas to his own benefit and the benefit of others.

Inadequate attention to the above is often found on the scene of ministerial training in India. Candidates for ministry often come from a strong fundamentalist background and on them are heaped the historical critical method of Bible study and ideas of ministry based on the theology of liberation. The result is that the student in many cases comes out with little conviction about either. If instead we can allow the students to have a good look at the psychological roots of a rigid, clinging faith, it is likely to provide new insights for the student regarding his own theological position and so enable him to embrace a more inclusive and wholesome faith.

The place of a healthy Christian community in the formation of a healthy professional identity in the student cannot be overstated. The frankness and openness which Jesus encouraged in his community of disciples may be taken note of. A human being needs understanding and appreciation for growth, support to overcome crises and caring confrontation to become aware of his own blind spots. A Christian community is one which provides all these. But in reality, for the sake of peace, discords and conflicts are consciously or unconsciously hushed up so that inward resentments appear in masked ways. Teachers of practical theology need to equip themselves with the basics of group processes so that they can facilitate openness and intimacy on the campus. Such openness will encourage the student to develop sufficient concern for people for them to be good nurturers or comfortably confronting when either attitude is called for in their relationship to others. When they are face to face with "principalities and powers," they will feel strong enough to say "no" and when they are face to face with the weak and the oppressed they can be filled with compassion, as our Lord was.

III Inducing New Vigour into the Teaching of Traditional Subjects

Homiletics, worship and Christian education traditionally fall under practical theology. A fresh look at the importance of and the appropriate attitude to these subjects is certainly called for. Often it is said in an unthinking way that the age of preaching is over and that the age of action is on. Nothing can be more damaging to the Gospel than this attitude to preaching. This wrong attitude is due to a false identification of preaching with moral exhortation. In truth, preaching consists of the proclamation of the mighty acts of God in the past, present and future to the whole world so that all may hear this in their own language as on the day of Pentecost. Obviously

preaching is much more than repeating the events associated with the life of Christ or representing the meaning of the Christ event as narrated in the New Testament. Preaching truly accomplishes its task only when the mighty acts of God in Christ are proclaimed to the modern world in such a way that the eyes of the world may be opened to recognise and acknowledge the mighty acts of God in Christ as they continue to be done in history. In other words preaching Christ should mean preaching the resurrected Christ who promised "Behold, I am with you till the end of the age."

In the Protestant traditions worship has suffered neglect. In extreme cases preaching has simply swallowed it. In the Orthodox tradition worship dominates the scene; but it is a completely inward looking worship, despite strong avowals to the contrary by its modern exponents. As if to make amends for past mistakes, there are desperate moves in Protestant circles to "make worship relevant" and a renewed interest in Orthodox circles to be acquainted with the history of liturgy. But neither of these by themselves will make the Church a truly worshipping community. Worship is the occasion when the Church declares in the most powerful way its priestly character. It comes together in worship as mediator for the world and it goes out into the world to live the meaning of the sacraments, and thereby to consummate the true meaning of worship. Therefore a truly worshipping Church is one truly involved in mission. In other words a renewal in worship goes hand in hand with a renewal in mission. The question of new forms in worship cannot be meaningfully discussed without taking into account this inseparable connection between worship and mission.

Teaching worship and preaching has to take into account these insights. Teaching to preach has to transcend items like selecting a text and theme, using commentaries, development of sermon outlines, use of illustration and so on. By the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit the student is to be enabled to develop a discerning mind to see the mighty acts of God in the contemporary world. He is to develop the skilful art of entering the biblical world through one door to come out into the contemporary world by another.

These insights about preaching cannot in fact be taught. These need to be caught by students as a result of genuine opportunities for social involvement when they may discover the Word of God for the present day by interaction with the written Word of God. Powerful preachers for the present world will not emerge from a traditional classroom where knowledge is supposed to come first through the teacher's mouth and then through books. Powerful preachers will emerge when students and teachers are gripped by a passion to be with the people of God in their everyday struggles and search for God's Word in the world and in the word.

Similarly the teaching of Christian worship has to transcend concern with forms of worship. A study of the history of liturgical forms has to concentrate on the creative principles as they appear from time

to time and analyse the roots of decay when worship has gone dead. Neither abolishing all structured worship nor re-introducing forms from some supposedly golden age in liturgical worship will suffice. The efforts of the teacher and the student have to shift to discover the link between secular life and worship. When this link is discovered one may hope that new forms of true quality will arise. They will enable the Church to hallow all areas of human life and reveal the spiritual foundations of secular and religious life. These days a lot of talk goes on about indigenisation of worship. The products of indigenisation often feel spurious, without a soul which makes it a living entity. I feel that students are to be encouraged to go into a depth experience of other religions and secular life guided by the Spirit of Christ. This will result in more genuine indigenisation. Indiscriminate borrowing of prayers and practices will not help. They will only dampen the spirit of Christian worship. Training in creating forms relevant to contemporary life may best be given by the theological communities engaging in evolving new forms relevant to their own life and experience.

Traditionally Christian education has been preoccupied with Sunday School teaching and familiarising the laity with elements of Christian doctrine. More recently we have become aware of the educational ministry of the Church to the whole world. This means the imparting of education which will bring wholeness to people. In this context modern critiques of traditional education become relevant. The Church ought to be grateful to Paulo Freire for his insights on education for liberation. It will perhaps be most pertinent to look at the quality of education available in theological colleges. More particularly, the insights of Paulo Freire are to be applied to the teaching of practical theology. The effort to teach a set syllabus certainly needs to be modified. If the following are taken care of, the quality of education will significantly improve:

- (1) The setting of the goals of learning for a particular course jointly by the teacher and students.
- (2) The devising of opportunities for the process of learning through action-reflection.
- (3) The enabling of the students to be responsible for their learning instead of passively depending on the teacher.
- (4) The willingness of the teacher to learn from the students.

A theological education programme based on the above lines will significantly enhance the self-respect of the student. This will enable him to carry on his own ministry of education along similar lines.

Conclusion

In former days the emphasis in teaching was on imparting information and skills. Today we need to go much farther. The development of self and the ability to relate creatively to the environment are most important. The teaching of practical theology has to be carried on with full awareness of this.