

A CHANGING THEOLOGY FOR CHANGING TIMES?

Some churchmen – have little or no regard for the articulation of doctrine. The climate of many large denominations is non-theological. There is an accommodation to the mores and culture of our age. The church has become an integral part of the North American way of life – just like apple pie and ice cream. Many churches join the slogan "Go to the church of your choice!" Doctrinal differences are apparently irrelevant. Activism has priority.

The theology of Dorothee Sölle, Thomas Altizer, William Hamilton, and Paul van Buren have not found ready acceptance. But it is remarkable that their works are being widely read and seriously studied. We read about the death of God, and about God after the death of God. The little book *Honest to God* shook the Western world. It was not profound but a bishop spoke about his doubts! Men have walked and driven a vehicle on the moon, and changed the "destiny" of man. Can we still talk about God? America is rapidly becoming a World City.

"In such a setting, encounter with the major live alternatives on the world scene (Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism) is a normal part of education for life on a shrinking globe."¹ Can we still proclaim the uniqueness of Christianity or should we say with Dorothee Sölle: "The church is also outside of the church"? Should we embrace the universalism of the influential Roman Catholic theologian Hans Kung, who wrote in a letter to a young friend: "We may and must proclaim, as witnesses and apostles of Jesus Christ, the gospel in word and deed, in the realization that God's grace in Jesus Christ has already embraced them (i.e., the heathen)"?²

It seems to me that we are heading for a Christianity without content. Pulpits of many great churches have become platforms for political pronouncements and/or nice platitudes. Many Christians in the pew are bewildered. And for years they have been alarmed by the abandonment of historic Christian doctrine by church leaders, who recite the ancient creeds in worship services, but deny their validity. Dr. Harold O. J. Brown warns evangelical Christians that "they should be more alarmed by the fact that *doctrine* itself is being abandoned."³

Fashion and Pride

"There are those who think that the new age is so very new that nothing that approved itself to past ages can conceivably be valid now.... There are old things which ought to remain in the new age; and many of the things, both good and bad, which the new age regards as new are really as old as the hills."⁴ These words by J. Gresham Machen were written many years ago, but they still carry a message today.

Machen battled the theological fashions of his time. Many of his contemporaries discarded orthodoxy like an old rag. They wanted to drink the new heady wine produced in the winepresses of modern culture. They cut off from their moorings in

Biblical tradition. In our twentieth century it has been quite fashionable to commit spiritual adultery, leave the Scriptures, and flirt with every new philosophy which appears on the scene. The past has nothing to say anymore. The Reformation theologians of the sixteenth century were rather ignorant chaps.

The symbol of liberalism in Machen's days was Harry Emerson Fosdick.⁵ Left wing liberals felt that common honesty demanded that Fosdick should leave the evangelical denomination he was associated with at that time. But "reformer" Fosdick rejected this idea. "We (unlike the radical liberals) . . . were determined not to surrender to the fundamentalists the control of the great historic denominations. . . . For all the liberals to desert them, leaving their long accumulated prestige, their powerful influence and their multitudes of devoted Christian people in the hands of fundamentalist leadership, seemed to us an unthinkable surrender and an intolerable tragedy to the Christian cause."⁶

Fosdick believed that time was on his side. The slow process of education was bound to put an end to such orthodox thinking. He believed that liberals should patiently wait, claiming their liberty, and abiding their time... for the liberals to have deserted the old line denominations and to have surrendered them to reactionary leadership would have been a recreant and craven policy, with tragic consequences.⁷

Fashion and pride are the marks of liberalism. Dr. J. Buskes says that nowadays you get the impression that many consider the Christians of former ages as rather naive and simple. This means that Christians of our time are not naive and simple, that only now – in this twentieth century – the light has dawned and that we do well to forget about the past nineteen centuries or not to pay too much attention to the past.⁸

To think that we have only now gained deep theological insights and understanding is the height of folly and arrogance! Humility is still a virtue! We must learn from the past as the Spirit of God has always been present in the church. "Any presupposition that the nineteen-sixties are automatically likely to be better at the job than the sixteen-sixties must be ruled out of court in advance; for that presupposition would bring back the false doctrine of progress by the back door, subtly re-imposing that servitude to the temporal, that tyranny of the future, which Christian spirituality, morality, and reason alike reject."⁹

A changing theology

Does theology continually change with the times? Do modern theologians stand in the continuity of the church? The question ought to be: Does the content of theology change? This question is directly related to the norm for theology. When theologians claim the need for change so that modern man can be reached, then we ought to beware. Harry Emerson Fosdick declared that "What is permanent in Christianity is not mental frameworks but abiding experiences that phrase and rephrase themselves in successive generations' ways of thinking and that grow in assured certainty and in richness of content."¹⁰

Thus the authority for our religious beliefs dwells within. The early Christians had no intention to build a church outside the synagogue. There were no creeds etc. Christianity is a life to be lived.¹¹ As man advances and builds a new culture upon the latest scientific findings, theologians must find new ways and forms to keep in step with the times.

Now we should ask the question: Does truth grow? Dr. H. Kuitert likes to speak about truth on the move.¹² You cannot identify truth with Scripture as Scripture is time-bound.¹³ Kuitert talks about the need to "experience" the Word. We find each other not in our mutual subjection to Scripture, but in our mutual experience of faith. Truth is incomplete, including Biblical propositions. Truth is continually unfolding. The truth is not here as yet, but the Spirit shall lead us to all truth.¹⁴

However, historic Christianity is rooted in Truth. Theology has a well-defined content. In church history we find the great Creeds with different emphases on the same content, as given in the Scriptures. In the theology of the Reformers, John Calvin and Martin Luther, and of men like Charles Hodge, Benjamin Warfield, J. Gresham Machen, and of our contemporaries, such as Carl F. Henry and Francis Schaeffer, we find the same content.¹⁵

An unchanging theology for changing times

There is a basic continuity in the church. No modern theologian can start with a clean slate. The church has been "theologizing" for centuries. Many scholars before our time have written and taught.

The theologian tunes in to the past. He listens carefully and respectfully to the church fathers and the Reformers. He consults the creeds and the confessions, in which the church expressed her understanding of the contents of the gospel. For the Christian theologian the past is alive. He deals with eternal truth. The church cannot change the basic contents of her teaching.¹⁶

Biblical Christianity does not rest on a myth or a philosophy. It is based on factual content. God has spoken in a verbalized, propositional way in the Bible.¹⁷ The only norm for theology is the Word of God. If another norm is used, then we get caught in subjectivism. Truth cannot be on the move. Truth has come from eternity into time. It is not something to chase after but it has been entrusted to the Church of all ages. This does not leave room for innovations or fads.

This does not mean that we must quit the field of theology and that we are not allowed to offer criticism of the past. But our sole authority is Scripture. And critique of the past is therefore permissible only when, through digging deeply into the treasure mines of Scripture, further light can be shed upon an aspect of doctrine. We are never to accept the principle of change in the realm of theology. If we do this, in time we will lose the authority of the Christian faith. And modernistic theology is a rather sorry but vivid

illustration. "Theology must be fresh if the church and the individual Christian are to live, but it must not be different."¹⁸

The heart of dogmatics is Scripture. It is the explanation of the message of God's Word as understood in faith. A theologian should only want to repeat what Scripture teaches. Our changing age needs the ageless message of the Word of God!

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