

Erasmus and Modern Theology

Erasmus (1469-1536) in his famous *Praise To Folly* pokes fun at hair-splitting theologians. They are so busy with the making of their definitions, exact formulations and words that they have no time to turn to the gospels or the epistles of Paul. Erasmus was frustrated with the hair-splitting, abstract theologies of his day. I am inclined to say, "Erasmus, what you felt then I can share."

Theology is in crisis. Conservative theology is often too abstract and theoretical. It is still far too provincial and isolated from general cultural thinking. Conservative theologians respond more to issues than being creatively involved in developing a systematic theology that addresses itself to the basic needs of our times.

Modern theology has become non-theology and a word game for experts. There is something seriously wrong in the desire of many theologians to think and write only for their theological colleagues rather than for the public. The new theological vocabulary is baffling. It seems to be directed only to the initiated. Who can understand a sentence such as Thomas J. Altizer's "only the death of God can make possible the advent of a new humanity"?⁽¹⁾ The Jewish theologian Dr. Richard Rubenstein, who sympathizes with Altizer, does not like to use the words "death of God." His students asked him, "Well, are you a 'death of God theologian' or not?" His answer was, "I am a 'holy Nothingness' theologian."⁽²⁾ This sounds like very learned nonsense.

How times have changed! In the past, the scholars of the church wrote so that literate men could understand and appreciate their works. St. Augustine, John Calvin, Martin Luther and Abraham Kuyper are much easier to read than many of our contemporaries. Since theology is not just to be understood by a secret society but by the church, it ought to be readable. It may be scientific to say,

Scintillate, scintillate, globule, vivific,
Fain would I fathom thy nature specific,
Loftily poised in the ether capacious,
Strongly resembling a gem carbonaceous.

But it is more communicative to state,

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are,
Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky.⁽³⁾

Theology should not be a play-thing for experts. Each Christian in a sense is a theologian. If the church is to live in this post-Christian world and speak meaningfully then it must think. And to think systematically is not a sin or an exercise in futility. Christian doctrine is not a series of isolated ideas, but it has a beginning and an end. To be creatively involved in systematic theology means not only to study the works of our times, but also those of the past. C.S. Lewis commented: "For a great many of the ideas about God which are trotted out as novelties today

are simply the ones which real Theologians tried centuries ago and rejected."⁽⁴⁾ The reason so many prefer new theologies is that they never bothered to take the time to read the old.

Modern theology leads us into a blind alley. Dr. Rubenstein, the death of God theologian, paints a very clear picture as to where radical theologies will lead us. He tells us of the way Isaac Bashevis Singer ends his novel, *The Family Moskat*, "The Germans are before the gates of Warsaw in September, 1939. One of the brothers, realizing that Hitler is at the gates of Warsaw, affirms, as Jews have for thousands of years: 'I believe in perfect faith that the Messiah will come speedily in our days.' The other brother is astonished and says: 'How can you say this?' The first replies: 'Surely he will come. Death is the messiah.'" Dr. Rubenstein remarks: "There is only one way out of the ironies and the ambiguities of the human condition: return to God's nothingness, the radical non-being of God and death."⁽⁵⁾

Theology does not need to be an exercise in futility. It can and should be a doxology. First of all, we need again a fascination of the mystery and majesty of the holy God. Even conservative theology suffers from a shrivelled view of God. God has become pitifully small even for those of us who believe in the Word of God, who claim to be heirs of the prophets and the Reformers. The glorious descriptions of the great God of Scripture seem to be unnoticed. In our business to show God's presence in this world, our awe for Him has not increased. We can be so active that there is no time for beholding. The analysis by J.B. Phillips of God in his little book, *Your God Is Too Small*, is perfectly applicable to the idea many seem to have of God. But we have a God for whom nothing is impossible and who is beyond our understanding. Theology that is fascinated with the greatness of God will also capture the heart of men. A theology that springs from the heart will also become practical and real. Theologizing for the church can only be done prayerfully in the presence of God. "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things; to whom be glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:36). Secondly, we need to go back to the basics. The structure of dogmatics must be raised upon a sound foundation. Theology must bow before the Word of God and has no right to doubt it. Theology is doxology when it searches the rich mines of Scripture. Dr. A. Kuyper describes theology as "the melting of the ore of the revealed knowledge of God."⁽⁶⁾ As soon as theology is no longer bound to the Bible, than it becomes speculation rather than a theology.

A theologian can receive no knowledge of God unless he receives his knowledge of Him in absolute dependence upon Scripture. Only a believer can do theology as only the children of the kingdom have knowledge of God through Jesus Christ.

Many theologies today are a "Praise To Folly". Theology can be a doxology when it is based upon the infallible Bible. Of course, the doxology is only real when we accept the fact that the knowledge of God is not just for our own benefit, but that God takes pleasure in making Himself known to His creatures.

Bibliography:

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(4) Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. p.122

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