

THE THEOLOGIAN AS CON- SCIENCE FOR THE CHURCH*

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It is no accident that the middle word in our society's name refers to Theology. Christ the Redeemer lies at the heart of our interests, and Christ is in a unique way the revealer of God. But does a theologian sit at the door of the church to review all that goes in and comes out? That idea is caricature.

Theology As a Measure of All Knowledge

Perhaps, we should begin with the simplest of definitions. Despite the American penchant for Madison Avenue image-management, at the most fundamental level the theologian is a person who seeks a knowledge of God. This understanding carries a variety of ramifications. Our first premise accepts God as the central fact of all the universe. This means there is no way we can exaggerate His importance.

For this reason theology becomes in one sense a kind of monitor beside which all other knowledge must pass. If this idea does not challenge us with the widest possible sweep, I know no way it can be done. Beyond being one of the professions, even the most time-honored among them, theology's radical position sets God as the measure of all and gives meaning in the human experience.

Should not a person tremble to step into the glare of such a work? Who is worthy? Yet God has seen fit to set in these vessels of clay the unlimited treasures of contact with His creatures.

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In the shadow of this fact, we must note that theologians have not done so well in the past. Despite our efforts, far too many of the world's citizens, among them many Adventists, have only the most tenuous grasp of the cosmic dimensions involved. Too often theologians have not given a certain sound, and increasingly their hearers have written them off as more or less irrelevant.

Practical Theology: Primary Assignment

To this point our discussion has almost suggested that theology is a preserve of professionals, steeped in academic pursuits, dusty tomes, thick-lensed glasses, and Omega conjugations; who pursue marginal glosses and canonical history and are expected to emerge as mythic renaissance persons. If our assignment is as broad as suggested, here lies a kernel of truth.

We find in the Scriptures a *people* doing theology, the church as a whole kneaded by Spirit-given messages from God. It is striking that most spokesmen and women for God were selected not at all from the intellectual elite, but from among ordinary people caught up from the common paths of life. To be sure we can cite an exceptional Moses, Jeremiah, or Paul. But upon looking at the full sweep of those chosen we discover commoners prevail. Even Jesus' selection of disciples reinforces the point.

Could it be that to prepare a people, equipped with spiritual abilities to identify truth, to sort from life's mixture that which is of God and that which is counterfeit, is among our primary assignments? If this is in fact a part of our task, we are not doing so well.

Biblical Research's assignment calls us to wrestle with troublesome matters, but what is surprising is the degree of confusion among our believers. When persons of trust and responsibility can read a tract or book, culled from the blizzard of unmonitored publications about us, a document tintured with substantial errors, then call to ask weakly, "Do you think there is any problem with this publication?" something is missing. This scenario is alarmingly common.

We recognize that self-flagellation is unproductive, but we have much room for improvement. We must make opportunities to help our believers learn to do theology. Our standing must not be measured by advanced degrees, ability to juggle arcane ideas, or

skills in performing fancy footwork in hermeneutics, but by the ability to help our people become rooted and grounded in the truth of God, which we have long titled "present truth."

We must help our people develop a fascination with the Word of God. If our premise is true, that in all things God's message is the measure, we should be able to make a significant difference and persuade many that the most important thing of all is to know God and to walk with Him.

How to Meet Our Challenges?

How do we go about such a task? At least two score models come to mind. Perhaps we can think of ourselves as theological explorers, whose high privilege it is to lead the people of God from crest to crest, from each height unfolding a new panorama that fills hearts with awe and shows the pursuit of God to be the most rewarding of all enterprises. In this we appear not as puffed up experts, but servants of God, standing among a people we love, side by side leading onward to Christ and the Holy City. But we must be the people of faith that looks beyond mountain ranges. God's truth merits it and our task requires it.

What of the idea of our serving as conscience for the church? Should anyone undertake to be conscience for anyone else? Does this not suggest an intrusion into the place of the Spirit of God? Not really, for the conscience must be set in tune with the Word of God. And that is our assignment.

How can we honor our mandate to fulfill Jesus' assignment, "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you"? We must never think of this task as usurping the freedom of others to choose. We are in the values business but not the brain-washing business. Ours is not a Waco mentality, where trust becomes unreasoning obsession.

In the midst of the Branch Davidian ordeal I received a telephone call from Livingston Fagan, direct from the McLennan County Jail in Waco. He was one of those who left the Branch Davidian Shepherds Rod compound early on. I was intrigued that he would want to talk with someone in Adventist circles, especially when I discovered he had attended Newbold and for a time was in the Adventist ministry in the British Union.

What would be Fagan's attitude now? The question was soon answered, for my ear was bombarded with an artesian repetition of the ideas of Howell, about the coming Davidic kingdom, the seven seals, which he argued began February 28, 1993, and Koresh's standing as a reincarnation (that was his term) of Jesus of Nazareth. Here was a prime specimen of brainwash.

We are sobered by remembering that of the roughly 90 persons remaining to the end in the compound, virtually all were once Seventh-day Adventists, many being persons of education. There is little to suggest they were not there willingly, and if Fagan serves as example, they were conscience driven. But the driving cannot be of God.

Where does responsibility lie in a case such as this? Is this merely a collection of aberrant minds beyond the pale of reason, or have we in some way done less than we could as these people passed by us? Are we prepared to cope with the fact that the majority of the people inside the Waco compound have attended our schools and passed under the influence, whatever that may have been, of our Bible teaching?

I am not suggesting that we are wholly responsible, for we must reckon with the freedom of the will; but honesty requires us to ask ourselves, what could we have done better?

We can talk of the collective conscience of the church, and it is imperative that we think in such terms when we conceive of overall, telos-oriented strategies. But such talk becomes glib. The real task of theology must be to permeate the whole of the body of Christ, and that requires a one-by-one ministry. Although it is draining, it is our work. It was Jesus' principal way of ministry. To take the vision of the collective and transmit it to each struggling Christian must be a major part of our assignment.

Facing Shifting Paradigms

If we were faced with a fixed understanding of God and His will, to be shared with people of fixed needs, our task would be easier. We need not dabble in process thought to observe that we take a growing understanding of God to a body of believers themselves in perpetual transition. It mandates an adaptability that at the same time honors the truth about God and a true understanding

of Him. It becomes especially important in a world marked by shifting paradigms in world views, values, and theology.

Today we are faced with a bewildering variety of options in all three of these areas. Of all fields, theology seems most vulnerable to paradigm shift, especially because of its ties to meaning.

When the Enlightenment transformed theological thinking from normative to descriptive, its implications were not clearly identified by its theological leaders. Christians noticed that around them the world seemed to be losing interest in things religious. New theories arose to explain mysteries, and solid study of the Bible seemed to decline, giving way to a subjective religion.

But the public was not alerted to the reason for all this. Theologians seemed preoccupied with debating one another while the world marched by, quietly consigning them to respected irrelevance. A new world grew up, in which religion is honorably imprisoned, released on weekends for those who savor it, but was of little special meaning to most.

For much of the developed world today this is an accurate statement of the case. The study of God metamorphosed into a branch of science, absolutes vanished, pluralistic attitudes became fashionable, and while maintaining a presence in the western world, religion lost its place. Gerhard Hasel traced important elements of its impact on theology in books published 1978 and 1992.

Today we observe a resurgent supernaturalism of such character that observers talk in terms of a major paradigm shift. Now marching through the minds of today's sophisticates come forms of eastern mysticism, pantheistic world spirits, and a host of similar phenomena. Most university curricula already reflect the changes, and the alert watcher sees the concepts surface in the world of entertainment, where the new ideas are touted by much-admired Hollywood, rock, and sports figures.

A great deal of this also surfaces under the guise of multiculturalism, concern for the environment, animal rights activism, and similar causes. Alongside legitimate concerns each is infiltrated increasingly by a philosophical structure investing nature with a form of divinity. Today's self-development movement speaks consciously in terms of infused powers.

Generations of people, long assured that science had dispelled

all elements of transcendence, have concluded that all along they did not quite believe it. Now resurgent forms of belief in the supernatural emerge while the membrane between fact and fiction fades. Even children's cartoons pioneer the new way.

But what has all this to do with theology? Much in every way, especially for Adventists. Always we have maintained that the final events of history would take place in a climate of profound supernaturalism. Revelation's chapters 12 to 14 describe commanding religiopolitical forces driving events immediately prior to Christ's return. While theologians have listened uneasily, critical of speculative scenarios of final events described to be fulfilled in physical and political terms, we have been only dimly conscious of paradigm changes in the belief and value system that controls behavior. Already we have reached the time when a Christlike apparition could appear and attract not only the traditionally religious, but innumerable people newly sensitized to such possibilities. We are rapidly shifting to an age of new irrationalism.

New Approaches Are Needed

Who more than theologians are in position to track the developments just described? But my observation is that few of us are doing so. Our magazines have little or nothing to say along these lines. Nor are these developments often discussed from our pulpits.

If in any sense we are vested with the role of conscience, we have work to do. What do we mean when we speak about the commanding primacy of Christ in a postmodern era? Are our believers being taught how to trace the sources of their values and decide what options are compatible with the Bible? We have too long focused only on behaviors—where we go and what we do or don't do.

Many of the unmonitored publications circulating among us call for a return to standards. But the deductive approach to standards no longer registers with the bulk of our members today. Do our members know why? Are we helping them understand how unsuspected value-forces are largely determining their choices?

Do they recognize that in the West, at least, an abnormal reverence for individual autonomy undercuts self-sacrificing concern for others? Are they aware of the impact upon us exerted by

70 years of a value-free public education plan that exalts non-judgmentalism as the sole virtue? Do they see how the clamor for pluralism heard so loudly among us in some quarters is largely the offspring of the contemporary nonjudgmental ideal, despite strained efforts to anchor it in the Scriptures?

Increasingly it is clear that as the power of Christ's message through the Word diminishes, a sense of vague uncertainty develops. Once-held truths are privatized and reduced to the level of opinion. Our church is confronted by this phenomenon today, and confusion on a scale not previously known is taking a bitter toll.

As responsible Adventist theologians, what then is our response? We acknowledge Christ's penetrating dictum: To whom much is given, much is expected. It will not do merely to wring our hands, decry and condemn. This is the tack of some, but by no means all of the private ministries. Their following grows largely from the vacuum created when they fail to hear the ring of certainty once heard among us.

Others promote alternatives: the pursuit of novelty in worship, entertainment cast as worship, and forays into the social sciences in pursuit of fulfilling relationships. We may not like to hear this, but again it will not do for us simply to call for the authority of the Word, as correct as that is. We must face the fact that while there are certain hearers, a majority of the church in the first world is no longer listening to that call.

Given the invasiveness of contemporary values, our former didactic approach is ever less effective. Theologians loyal to Christ's Word must construct new ways that not only instruct but teach our people how to discern among widely-accepted value systems that compete for their loyalty. This work is scarcely begun, but I can bear personal witness that it can cast trite old discussions into new channels, resulting in new insights and spiritual progress.

Let me cite a case in point. Each year a class from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington's American University visits the General Conference. Early on comes the inevitable question: What is different about Adventists? Our visitors expect a promotion of Sabbath observance, a vegetarian diet, or for the alert, something about the pre-advent judgment or Ellen White.

For the past two years I have avoided all the above with the simple response, "We are a people with a unique world view of cosmic proportions. Jesus Christ is central: Originator of all things, Redeemer, and coming King." Then follow a few sentences about how our comprehensive vision, described as a great controversy, integrates everything in the Scriptures as well as what we find in nature. Then I tell them, "If you find unusual things about us, which you will, it is because we measure everything by the biblical world view, and accept only what is found in harmony with it."

This simple response releases a vigorous discussion. What comprises our world view? Can it really integrate all things? One by one our truths slip into niches in ways they never imagined. When the group departs, each time several students remain for intense personal inquiries about the Adventist faith that indicate interest beyond the academic.

This is only one example, but the challenge lies before us. All too often those of us with a high level of trust in the historic Adventist message have left creativity in the hands of others, by default forfeiting influence we could have had. We need to chart new waters for God. In so doing we fulfill both the work of conscience and salvaging souls. And in these we bear faithful witness to the Saviour's commission.