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WILLIAM BARCLAY, M.A., D.D.

Why Theology?

It may at first sight seem strange to connect the word theology with the Synoptic Gospels at all. The word theology has suggestions of abstruse thinking, recondite speculation, elaborate statement, erudite terminology, which all seem far removed from the apparent simplicities of the Synoptic Gospels. The leaders of the Jews called the early disciples 'uneducated and common men' (Acts iv. 13; AV, 'ignorant and unlettered men'). It must be remembered that when they so described them they were not thinking of them as totally illiterate. What they were saying was that these disciples were laymen with no technical religious knowledge and with no theological education. It is not to say that they were unable to read or write; it is to say that they were not theologians as the Rabbis were.

It is true that in the Synoptic Gospels there is no carefully and comprehensively wrought out scheme of theology; and it is equally true to say that Jesus was not a systematic theologian in the technical sense of the term. But what does theology basically mean? To have a theology is to have a coherent and consistent view of God, man and the world. The Stoics defined philosophy as 'knowledge of things human and divine and their causes' (Marcus Aurelius 3.1.5; Sextus Empiricus, *Math.* 9.13; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 333; Cicero, *De Off.* 2.5 – *sapientia rerum divinarum and humanarum causarumque scientia*: Cicero, *Tusc.* 4.57; 5.7; Seneca, *Ep.* 89.5 – *sapientia est nosse divina et humana et horum causas*). Just so Quintilian demands of the orator a knowledge of things human and divine (*Inst.* 12.2.8). Jurisprudence is defined as 'the knowing of things human and divine and the knowledge of that which is just and unjust' (Ulpian *Dig.* 1.1.10.2; Justinian, *Instit.* 1.1.1.).

Knowledge of things human and divine, knowledge of God and man stand closely and indeed inextricably connected. Minucius Felix has it: 'Things are so coherent, so closely com-

bined and interconnected, that, without careful consideration of the nature of the deity you cannot know that of man' (*Octavius* 17.2).

In this sense the Synoptic Gospels are clearly theological documents, and Jesus had a theology, for they and he most certainly proceed on a coherent and consistent view of God, man and the world. It is our task to penetrate behind the unsystematic words of the Gospels to the basic truths which lie behind them.

The study of theology is always attended by two dangers.

i. There is the danger of being too critical, too analytical, too detached, the danger of treating the whole study as no more than an intellectual exercise and adventure. Beatrice Webb, later Lady Passmore, looking back on the studies and the discussions of the Fabian Society, used to speak of 'the stimulus of the mental hike'. There is the danger of looking on the whole enterprise as no more than a fascinating and intellectually exciting mental hike.

It is repeatedly insisted that we must study the New Testament as we would study any other book, that we must submit it to the same critical analysis and to the same acid tests, to the same detailed examination, and to the same stringent investigation. With that insistence everyone will be in total agreement. But there are two things to be said about it.

(a) First, religion and revelation cannot be separated. Therefore, theology for the Christian is the study of what is given – a fact to which we shall return. The Christian believes not only in the necessity of thought but also in the fact of revelation. The Christian theologian is free to move, but to move within a given area, although that area may be very wide. He is not spinning ideas out of his own head, as a spider spins its web. He is applying his mind to that which is given. Theology is thought exercised on revelation.

(b) Second, although we must study the New Testament with the same methods as any other book, we do not study it for the same purpose as any other book. The object of study is quite different. Other books may be studied for the information they may bring; they may be studied for their historical interest; they may be studied for their intrinsic beauty. But the New

Testament is studied by the Christian because it is for him the supreme rule of faith and life. It is through it that the Christian looks for the saving power of God, and it is in it that he finds his rule of life. He studies this book in order to act on this book. He studies it because it has in it that which it itself calls life. It must never be forgotten that for the New Testament truth is that which must be done as well as that which must be known. The Fourth Gospel speaks of the man who *does* the truth (John iii. 21). The method of study will be the same, but clearly the object of study is different.

This will mean that when we approach the study of New Testament theology we have to do so with a certain attitude of mind. We will not be content with intellectual activity and acrobatics, with mental research, with academic discipline – although all these things will necessarily have their place. We shall be concerned with the divine values which lie behind all these things, and we shall remember that the final end of this is commitment to that which we discover. We are concerned not only to know the truth but also to do and to accept the truth. Long ago Origen made a remark about the study of the Fourth Gospel. He said that no one could understand the Fourth Gospel unless, like the John of the Fourth Gospel, he had lain upon the breast of his Lord. In the study of New Testament theology, devotion has to be added to strenuous mental activity. We may well remember that in the Pastoral Epistles the writer – Paul or another – says, not, ‘I know *what* I have believed’, but, ‘I know *whom* I have believed’ (2 Tim. i. 12). At the end of the search there lies a person.

J. S. Whale quotes a saying of Melancthon, the friend of Luther, and himself no mean theologian: ‘To know Christ is not to speculate about the mode of his Incarnation, but to know his saving benefits’. And Dr. Whale himself goes on to say:

‘You may spend years on the sacred texts, the wearisome minutiae of linguistic and archaeological study, the arguments about the deepest things by which men live. But by studying these facts it is easy to lose the life which alone gives them unity and meaning . . . The mind may labour with great concepts such as those of the Trinity in unity, but the whole man cries out for the living God. As Luther put it, “He

who merely studies the commandments of God (*mandata dei*) is not greatly moved. But he who listens to God commanding (*deum mandantem*), how can he fail to be terrified by majesty so great?"

It is precisely the failure to remember this that has sometimes, not altogether unjustly, brought theology into disrepute as an arid and unprofitable discipline. It has always been claimed that theology is the Queen of the Sciences, but it was possible for Reuchlin, speaking of the theologians of the University of Cologne in the 18th century, to call them 'a species of most inhuman men who call themselves theologians'. Erasmus, speaking of the same type of mind and approach wrote: 'The life time of a man is not enough for these pseudo-questions and useless labyrinths of subtleties. When shall we find out what the Christian life is, if octogenarians have learned only to doubt?' Dr. Whale himself has described the attitude of mind which is not uncommon, and which is fatal to real theological study: 'Instead of putting off our shoes from off our feet, because the place whereon we stand is holy ground, we are taking nice photographs of the burning bush from suitable angles; we are chatting about theories of the Atonement with our feet on the mantelpiece instead of kneeling down before the wounds of Christ.'

This is an attitude with which we are familiar, and which we must try to avoid.

ii. There is the opposite danger of the attitude which is the opposite of that which we have been describing. There is the attitude which sees theology as the affair of the pedants and the pundits, but as of no importance at all to the ordinary man. To some extent – although now to a lesser extent – this has been the attitude in Germany. Norman Perrin writes (*The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, p. 35): 'For Germany theological discussion has been, and up to a point still is, the province of the academically trained theologian rather than that of the general lay member of the Church.' This he contrasts with the situation in Britain and in America. It may well be that herein is the very reason why German theology has always been regarded as the essence of the abstruse and the unintelligible.

But, if it is dangerous to see theology as nothing but intel-

lectual exercise, it is at least as dangerous to empty the religious life of all intellectual content altogether. It is fatal for any Church to begin to regard theology as the affair of the expert.

There is always a paradox and a tension in religion. Certainly, God, just because he is God, is unknowable. And equally certainly, God, just because he is God, must be known because man cannot do without him. So Dr. Whale writes: 'Christian testimony which raises no questions for the heart does raise them for the thought . . . They may be insoluble, but not to tackle them would mean intellectual suicide . . . We are meant to serve God with the mind, even where the mind is impotent to compass ultimate and ineffable mysteries. The obligation to be intelligent is a moral obligation.'

There is an even deeper reason than that why a faith must be a thought-out faith. That which is superficially held is easily lost. Unless a faith has been thought out and thought through, it will be in serious danger of complete collapse when the devastating experiences of life descend upon it. To be possessed it must be possessed by the whole man. A faith which is based on no more than an emotional experience is almost inevitably an impermanent thing, because it is characteristic of emotion to cool. Faith to be real must be the result of the combination of the activity of mind and heart. Harold Loukes wrote:

'No man is safe without faith, in the sense of an underlying view of life which offers him a means of interpreting the chaos of experience, a guide that, like the scientist's theory, tells him where to look, and what to pay attention to, a point of reference to which he can turn in his doubts.'

Faith then is based on certain certainties, and certainties are not attainable except by the effort of the whole man.

Quite as dangerous as the basing of faith on emotional experience is the making of it the glib repetition of conventional words and phrases, learned at second-hand. When a man is speaking or teaching or arguing, if anyone stops him and asks him, 'What do you mean by that?', he should be able to give an answer, and an answer which is his own.

There are two very significant passages in the New Testament which deal with the relationship of men to Jesus Christ. At Caesarea Philippi Jesus asked his disciples who men were

saying that he was. They told him that the popular verdict was that he was John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets. Then there comes the second question: 'But who do *you* say that I am?' (Mark viii. 27-30). The implication is clear. It is not enough to repeat what others have said about Jesus Christ. There must be a personal thinking out and a personal discovery. Again, when Jesus was on trial before Pilate, Pilate asked him: 'Are you the king of the Jews?' Jesus answered: 'Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?' (John xix. 33f.). The implication is the same. Any verdict on Jesus must be a verdict at which a man has himself arrived, and not something which he merely repeats on the authority of someone else.

It is clear that the discipline and the adventure of personal thought are essential, and obligatory. All through the study of theology it is necessary to remember that such study is more than an intellectual exercise, and that yet at the same time it must exercise the mind to the limits to which the mind can go.

We must go on now to define still further the necessity for theological study. First, let us again define theology, and in particular let us try to see wherein it, as it were, differs from religion. R. A. Ward defines theology as follows:

'Theology is reflection upon the divine revelation given and received, which yields the truth of God in the form of precise language, with truths related to truths.'

Theology then consists of the exercise of the human mind upon the material given by God. The difference then between religion and theology has been well put thus – in religion God is always 'Thou', in theology God is always 'He'. In religion God is a person to be encountered; in theology God is a truth to be known.

Paul Tillich has said: 'Every religion must have its *gnosis*.' Every religion must have that activity in which revelation and experience are passed through the mind, and are thus stated, formulated, understood, interpreted and appropriated.

i. Theology is necessary to satisfy the mind. Long ago Plato said that the unexamined life is the life not worth living; and it is equally true that the unexamined faith is the faith not worth having. No untested thing can be trusted. This is true of

material things. A bridge will be submitted to the most stringent tests before the passage of traffic is entrusted to it; and a faith must be submitted to equally demanding tests before a life can be entrusted to it.

Sydney Cave has said that there are three moments in Christian experience and in Christian theology. First, there is the moment of *revelation*, when a man encounters and is confronted with the truth. Second, there is the moment of *appropriation*, when a man takes into his own life the results of the truth revealed. Third, there is the moment of *intellectual interpretation*, when a man seeks to understand the why and the how of the experience which he has had.

An analogy has been suggested from another area of knowledge. Take the case of a flower. There is first the existence of the flower; that is revelation. There is second the seeing of the beauty and the smelling of the perfume of the flower; that is appropriation. Third, there is the science of botany which examines and classifies and defines the flower; that is intellectual interpretation. And in this analogy another truth yet emerges. Without that last section, without the science of botany, the flower can neither be properly cultivated, reproduced and perhaps developed into something still more beautiful and still more useful.

It is true that there are some people who can and do quite properly halt at the end of the second of these two stages. There are people who are content to see and to enjoy the flower without becoming botanists. And there are people who are content to know and to appropriate the saving benefits of God in Jesus Christ without the further step of interpretation.

I once listened to a lecture by Paul Tillich of great brilliance but of great obscurity. After it in conversation I said to him: 'Did you really expect everyone to understand what you have just been saying?' 'Oh no,' he answered. 'Well then,' I said, 'am I to understand that you are advocating a kind of new gnosticism in which religion is for the intellectual élite and in which the simple ordinary people have no part? Are you advocating a faith on two levels, one for the intellectual aristocrat and one for the intellectual peasant?' 'Oh no,' he said again. I asked him to explain. 'Well,' he said, 'it is like this. The truths of religion

are simple and can be grasped and appropriated by the simplest and the most childlike mind. What is difficult is the conceptualization of these truths.' This is completely true. Anyone can grasp and accept the offer of God in Jesus Christ, just as anyone can see and smell the flower. It is when you move to the intellectual task of understanding, formulating, interpreting, systematizing that the thing becomes difficult.

Then why bother? Why must someone undertake this impossible task? We have seen that, however keen be the pleasure given by the flower to the uninstructed, the science of botany is still necessary for the reproduction and the development of the flower. The same thing holds good in theology. Wherein then lie the special necessities for theology? Why is it necessary that, not everyone, but at least someone must undertake the adventure and the discipline of theological thought?

ii. Theology is necessary for teaching and for apologetic purposes. Phillips Brooks said: 'Doctrine is truth considered with reference to being taught.' There are two inter-related areas here.

(a) Truth has not only to be appropriated; it has also to be transmitted. It has to be shared with others, and it has to be passed down from generation to generation. It is impossible to transmit an experience; but it is possible to transmit a body of truth.

In any science and in any craft both the knowledge and the technique have to be reduced to a system and handed on. Both the theory and the practice of the thing have to be taught and learned. If we are going to pass on the Christian faith to the next generation, and if we are going to communicate it to this generation, there needs to be a body of truth to be passed on and to be communicated. True, it will not remain static, for truth is alive and not fossilized. It will grow and it will develop, but the basic and essential principles will remain the same. The internal combustion engine of today is a very much more complicated affair than the internal combustion engine of even thirty years ago; but its development is due to the fact that the principles which govern it were discovered and set down and systematized and passed on. That which has to be taught has first to be systematized; and it is so with Christian truth.

(b) But the faith has not only to be transmitted; it has also to be defended. It will always be subject to critical argument and to attack. If it is to be defended, it must be known. The argument of the opponent must be met with the argument of the Christian. This is precisely what Peter said to his converts: 'Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you' (I Peter iii. 15). Further, that defence must be an intelligent defence. There is no point in trying to close an argument with a quotation from Scripture or with the declaration, 'The Bible says', if we happen to be arguing with a man who does not accept the authority of the Bible at all.

It is not sufficiently realized that the preaching of the early Church was not the monologue which preaching has become; it was essentially a dialogue. Again and again the words *argue* and *dispute* appear in the narrative of Acts. People in the synagogue in Jerusalem arose and disputed with Stephen and could not withstand the wisdom and Spirit with which he spoke (Acts vi. 9f.). Very soon after his conversion Paul was preaching in the synagogue in Damascus and confounding the Jews by proving that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts ix. 22). So in Jerusalem on his first visit Paul proclaimed, spoke and disputed (Acts ix. 29). He argued in the synagogue at Thessalonica (Acts xvii. 2). He did the same at Athens (Acts xvii. 17). At Corinth he argued daily in the hall of Tyrannus (Acts xix. 9). Of course, this was easy in the Jewish synagogue in which there was no one person to preach the sermon, and in which anyone who had a message to give was free to give it, and where there was time to discuss the matter afterwards. But the opportunity for argument still plentifully exists; and to enter into a contest with an opponent with no equipment in what Christianity really says and means is to enter a fight naked and unarmed and doomed to defeat. The man who would defend the faith must know the faith, and he must know it in a way in which he has thought it out and not like a parrot repeating by heart conventional phrases. Harold Loukes speaks of the danger of traditional testimony when it becomes 'a way of avoiding thought'. 'To abide by a testimony may be simply to have our minds made up for us.' E. F. Scott has said that, oftener than we think, the

failure of Christianity as a moral force is due to no other cause than intellectual sloth.

The man who would defend the faith in a world which is often indifferent and sometimes hostile must know not only what Christianity says, but also why it says it and what it means, which is simply to say that he must have a theology.

iii. Theology is necessary as a test and touchstone. Every voluntary association of people is in one sense necessarily an exclusive body. People who come into it have to accept its rules and its regulations and its principles, and, if they will not, they cannot become or remain members of it. This is to say that any Church has to define, express, set out, and explain its beliefs. This is the work of the theologian. Brunner has said that the work of the theologian is comparable to the work of the analytical chemist. The analytical chemist tests the food which is offered for sale, and only if it passes his test can it be offered for sale, and, if it is submitted to his test, and fails to pass it, it stands condemned. It is impossible to separate preaching and theology. Behind the preaching stands the theology. Theology does not necessarily give the expression of preaching, but it does give the content of it. No preacher is entitled to preach what he likes, unless he likes to found a Church of his own. And that is precisely why a Church must have its theology and its theologians.

iv. We may add one further point, and in our present situation it is a point of very considerable importance. It is impossible to have an ethic without a theology. Theology and ethics cannot be separated. A man acts in a certain way because he thinks in a certain way. Thought ultimately determines action.

Let us take the most obvious of all examples. In any society a man will be treated in accordance with what he is assumed and believed to be. In the society contemporary with the New Testament a slave was a thing; he was classified as a living tool; it was perfectly legal for his master to beat him, imprison him, starve him, torture him and even kill him. He only differed from cattle and oxen in that he could speak. He could be dispensed with and literally thrown out as an outworn spade or hoe or plough was discarded, when it was past its work. This was the standard and natural way to treat a slave – and a slave is a man. Set beside that the famous story of Muretus the

wandering scholar of the Middle Ages. He was very poor. Penniless and ill he was once in a pauper's institution. The doctors did not think that he was really conscious and still less did they know that this apparently wretched creature could speak the scholar's Latin. Let him die, they said. He is only a worthless creature, a *vile corpus*. Whereat Muretus murmured in the same Latin: 'Call no man worthless for whom Christ died.' The moment you introduce the Christian theology the whole status of man as man is changed, and with that change the whole ethic of the relationship of man to man is altered.

A man's idea of God will decide what that man is like. Belief in a savage God will beget a merciless man; belief in a God of love ought to produce a man of love. Ethics and theology are inextricably bound together. For the preservation and defence of the Christian Faith, for the continuance and the communication of the Christian Faith, for the sanction of the Christian ethic, theology is essential.