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Theological Discussion and the Responsibility
of the Church

RICHARD L. JESKE

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Theological Discussion and the Responsibility of the Church

RICHARD L. JESKE

In a recent article entitled "New Testament Criticism and the Christian Layman," George Hedley, chaplain at Mills College, remarks:

There have been failures of communication within our schools, as well as between clergymen and laymen. The familiar joking about the documentary hypothesis or the synoptic problem, on the part of the seminary student body, is not all innocent fun. A good deal of it reflects a basic indifference toward the scholarly niceties which so much concern the research specialist; and that indifference issues all too often in a covert but real contempt for the intellectual issues involved. The student "gets through" Old and New Testament Introduction because they are required. Little of their significance gets through to him, and so almost none of it to his parish.¹

One is easily reminded of the often heard lament during seminary days, "Why should I have to study about 'Q'? All I want to be is a simple parish pastor!" Sometimes this "simple parish pastor" who has avoided hard theological work at the seminary emerges as the most vigorous critic of contemporary theology shortly after his graduation.

¹ *New Testament Sidelights: Essays in honor of Alexander Converse Purdy*, ed. Harvey K. McArthur (Hartford: Hartford Seminary Foundation Press, 1960), p. 108.

Richard L. Jeske, a graduate of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., is currently pursuing a program of advanced studies at the University of Heidelberg, Germany.

The question which logically follows then is whether such a creature as "the simple parish pastor" really exists, if by that phrase is meant a clergyman who should not be expected to be involved in theological thinking. Or is "the simple parish pastor" merely a contrived mental apparition whose spirit lurks mainly within seminary walls, providing assorted excuses for indolence, lethargy, anti-intellectualism, and suspicion?

The age is now past in the church when the pastor was the only link between theology and the layman. Secular book stores now offer shelves of current, stimulating, and progressive theological literature. The volume sale of theological paperbacks has reached staggering proportions. The range of theological topics in popular American news magazines testifies to the vitality of theological discussion directly involving both clergy and laity alike. The increasing demand for courses in religion and theology on the American college campuses is nearing a crisis with relation to the availability of qualified instructors needed to meet that demand.² It is generally recognized that the refusal of universities to admit theological study into their curricula has been a mistake; corrective measures have begun, and vigorous steps are now being taken to close the theological gap between professionals and nonprofessionals. In short, it has already begun

² Cf. the Education section in *Time*, Feb. 4, 1966, and the cover story in *Newsweek*, Jan. 3, 1966.

to be the case that the laity is issuing the challenge to the clergy to begin thinking theologically again, to articulate and discuss traditional doctrinal positions, and to offer theological answers to current social and theological problems. It is very important that the clergy take this challenge seriously and react positively toward it.

I

In this emerging atmosphere of theological renewal, what is the responsibility of "servants of the Word?" In a country in which intellectualism has in general been met with suspicion and where "theology" in particular has been regarded as a "bad word," what should be the response of the clergy to the sudden interest in contemporary theological discussion?

If theology can be defined briefly as "the intellectual articulation of the Christian faith,"³ it would be a contradiction in terms for a clergyman to consider himself "the simple parish pastor," who does not wish to become involved in theological thinking, study, and discussion. His very preaching demands that he articulate the Christian faith, and the increasingly higher level of religious acumen among the laity (to which he also should be contributing) will make greater and greater demands on the content of his sermons. Perhaps the first responsibility of the parish pastor is that he challenge his parishioners to challenge him. The sermon is not a monolog — a statement of the pastor's own faith or of his own doctrinal position; the sermon is a dialog which calls for response on the part of the hearers. A preacher

ought to be just as happy to hear "Terrible!" as he is to hear "Wonderful!" in reference to his sermon. In fact, he ought to be more pleased with the former comment, because the latter has become habit, fashionable, but largely devoid of any sincere meaning. Only those preachers who feel they can learn nothing from their hearers will not enter into dialog with them, and their preaching will reflect this attitude.

Theology and preaching cannot really be separated. Preachers who avoid theology and theologians who refuse to confront the demands of preaching have crippled themselves in the task of evangelizing the world and of articulating the Christian faith. For the commission to the world is an integral part of the Christian faith, and that commission presupposes the interdependency of theology and preaching. Heinrich Ott, professor of systematic theology at the University of Basel, Switzerland, states:

It may be necessary to affirm that dogmatics is the conscience of preaching and that preaching, again, is the heart and soul of dogmatics. In order to be able to preach at all well, the preacher must engage in dogmatic reflection, while the dogmatic theologian, in order to teach dogma well and truly, must realize that he works with the intention of preaching and must constantly bear in mind the mission of preaching, even though he himself does not have to mount the pulpit Sunday by Sunday. That preacher who proposed to be nothing other than a preacher and to leave dogmatic thinking to the specialist in dogma would be a bad preacher, a preacher without heart and conscience. And the dogmatist who proposed to be nothing other than a dogmatist and to leave to the pastor the concern with the practical task of church preaching would be a bad church

³ Peter Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), p. 124.

teacher; he again would be a dogmatist without heart and soul and conscience.⁴

It is in the sermon that the preacher also reflects the kind of reading he has been doing. This is the second area of responsibility that the pastor must take seriously. The seminary graduate who declares a moratorium on theological study upon receiving his diploma is not an unknown figure in America. He is a tragic figure — another contradiction in terms. During his ministry he will be trying to speak to the problems of an ever moving present but with the soon outdated equipment of an age already past. The solutions he offers will fit new problems only with increasing difficulty. His solutions may therefore become more “common-sense,” whatever that may mean, and less theological. Theology, because it has passed him up, again becomes a “bad word,” something suspect; and because he can no longer understand it, it becomes for him “irrelevant.” One does not wonder why he is a minister; one wonders, to use Ott’s idea, if he has a conscience.

Because of the multiplying number of religious books now available, the layman naturally will first think of looking to his pastor for advice concerning the literature he should buy and read. The minister’s responsibility in this regard cannot be overestimated.

. . . theology is not intended to be an esoteric pastime of incomprehensible intellectuals. Theology belongs to the Christian Church and thus ought to be the concern of the Christian laity — the people, the *laos*, of that Church. And certainly

those (such as Christian students) who pride themselves on their intellectual intrepidity in other areas cannot afford to relegate the theological task in its entirety to the experts.⁵

It should be noted that these words were written by a layman, a layman who has sensed the tension between a real Christian commitment and what he calls the “prevailing cultural religiosity” in America. He is calling for a theological evaluation of the church’s existence, challenging Christian believers to find the difference between their membership in the church and their membership in the local country club. This author, it is quite safe to say, is not the only layman in the church today who is challenging both professionals and nonprofessionals toward solid theological reflection. He is only one of many among the laity who have found love for and excitement in theology, a love and excitement which *must* be retained among the members of the clergy also.

Traditionally, however, it is the clergy who should be challenging the laity toward solid theological reflection. It is usually because of an underestimation by the clergy of the layman’s theological capability that this is not done. A pastor has also a *teaching* responsibility; it is hoped that this teaching responsibility will continue beyond confirmation instruction! Not only the saving of souls but also their *nurture* is the minister’s task; nurturing souls is not committing them to intellectual rigor mortis.

Quite often the literature recommended to the laity by the clergy has nothing to do with theology. It had become fashionable in some church circles a few years ago

⁴ *Theology and Preaching*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), p. 22.

⁵ Berger, p. 136.

to recommend anticommunist literature as if a Red invasion were imminent; anti-communist rallies were being held with great frequency within church walls. Different church groups who before were not able to get along with each other, especially because of differences in doctrine, were suddenly meeting together, praying, together, encouraging one another to gird themselves against the onslaught of the Red menace. The Christian cause became the anticommunist cause. Christian ministers became experts overnight in the detection of communist sympathizers who had infiltrated the hallowed halls of American life and thought. The gospel preached became the American gospel—the people of God, saved from the old world of religious slavery and now living in the promised land of religious freedom, must bear witness to the truth and fight the lie of the foreign forces of evil. The theological implications of this activity were seldom or never discussed.

The churches of the Augsburg Confession are in a particularly strong position to encourage rigorous theological study on the part of pastors and lay people. Lutheranism has within its reach resources for honest self-criticism of its own traditional and contemporary theology. Recalling the catholicity of Lutheran Reformation theology, along with its emphasis on the freedom of the Christian man under the Gospel, today's Lutherans cannot escape the demand issued by their own tradition to enter into open, fresh, and creative dialog with both the church and the world. There will always be groups within Lutheranism who believe that they alone possess the true heritage of the Lutheran Reformation; if they, however, shut themselves off from

respectable dialog with the "other sides," it may well be that they are betraying the very traditions they propose to uphold. It is noteworthy that the majority of theological writings recommended to readers by some publications which purport to be conservative Lutheran publications is not Lutheran literature. The wealth of contemporary Lutheran theological writings should not be simply dismissed in favor of non-Lutheran writings if one really respects the Lutheran confessional heritage. Pastors who wish their parishioners to remain true to this heritage should first of all recommend writings originating within it, not outside of it.

Of course, the cause of the Gospel of Christ is not furthered by listening *only* to the voices which arise from within one's own religious denomination if this leads to a spirit of separatism and isolation. The practice of surveying and recommending non-Lutheran literature that contributes to responsible dialog with other traditions is both the responsibility and the privilege of Christians living in today's world, for there has been a growing effort among all major Christian communions to engage in interdenominational discussion. This has contributed to a renewed interest in theology among college students in particular. Various seminaries throughout the United States are joining forces to establish common graduate study programs with faculties staffed by theologians whose work will be judged on the basis of scholarly merit rather than denominational stance.⁶ Cooperative scholarship can be an important means toward overcoming the usual tension and generally uninformed suspicion

⁶ Cf. the Religion sections in *Time* magazine, Nov. 6, 1964, and March 4, 1966.

existing among participants in interdenominational discussion. Such discussion can become an exciting and fruitful adventure; it can serve to remind us all that the body of Christ is larger than one's own denomination.

A step toward the realization that the church and her theology does not offer an "escape" from the world is a step forward. Laymen, whose activity leads them into daily direct confrontation with social, economic, and political problems, should be led into increasing awareness that the church does have something to say to the world and its problems. The impetus for this awareness ought to be furnished by the clergy as it was by Jesus Himself when He sent His disciples out *into the world*. A protective stance over against such engagement will in the long run prove to be only negative. Discussion with laymen of current provocative literature stressing this engagement will provide means toward the theological growth of both laity and clergy alike.⁷

⁷ The following is a list of paperbacks which might be used for such a discussion group:

Berger, Peter. *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961.

———. *The Precarious Vision — A Sociologist Looks at Social Fictions and Christian Faith*. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1961.

Brown, Robert McAfee. *The Significance of the Church*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956.

Burton, Pierre. *The Comfortable Pew*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1965.

Cox, Harvey. *God's Revolution and Man's Responsibility*. Valley Forge, Pa.: The Judson Press, 1965.

———. *The Secular City*. New York: Macmillan, 1965.

Danker, F. W. *The Kingdom in Action*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965.

A third area of responsibility shared by "servants of the Word" concerns their own productivity. The writing of theological literature has by and large been left to the members of theology faculties. This is to be accepted insofar as it does not necessarily belong to the calling of the parish pastor to provide the stimuli for theological discussion or to propose answers for the problems of theological research. The parish pastor is not a professional scholar. But this is not to say that there is no room in theological publications for his observations of the practical nature of the theological task. He should be encouraged to write both for church newspapers and magazines and for theological journals. The young clergyman just out of the seminary quite often hears from his senior colleagues that "with experience" his theological idealism will mellow, that seminary ivory towers are one thing but practical realities are another, that true wisdom comes from "involvement with the people" rather than from the isolated irrelevancy of modern theologies. In the spirit of true service to the church, perhaps the older clergy, especially those in retirement, should begin to share their experience with the church at large. If experience teaches truth, then such truth should not be kept hidden by those who possess it.

At this point a few remarks might be made with regard to the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY. As the primary

Marty, Martin. *The New Shape of American Religion*. New York: Harper, 1959.

Stringfellow, William. *A Private and Public Faith*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965.

Webber, George. *God's Colony in Man's World*. New York: Abingdon, 1960.

Williams, Colin. *Where in the World?* New York: National Council of Churches, 1963.

theological journal of one of the three major Lutheran bodies in America, it has a responsibility of engagement within the contemporary theological scene. This responsibility has been sensed by its present editorial committee, as shown, for example, by the October 1964 issue, which offered an overview of some current problems in the field of Old Testament theology. The particular strength of this "new venture for this journal," as it was called in the introductory editorial, is that of its interest in discussing these problems for the benefit of the *preacher*.

It is hoped that this new venture will be repeated with regard to the other areas of theology also. Vital theological questions now being discussed elsewhere ought also to be confronted in this journal. For example, the current discussion on justification, which began at the Helsinki Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, and the recent furor occasioned by the "Death of God" theologians are two problems which ought to be treated by our scholars in systematics. In the area of New Testament studies the question of the continuing validity of a Law-Gospel hermeneutic as raised by Krister Stendahl⁸ cannot go unnoticed in our circles. Among other problems in practical theology the contemporary debate concerning secularization and the common understanding of the church's role in society should be openly evaluated. Problems of method in historical research cannot be avoided any longer by our church historians. These are only random examples of issues that demand attention, this writer feels, in a journal

⁸ "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *The Harvard Theological Review*, LVI (1963), 199—215.

such as the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, especially if this journal is to assert a relevant voice in contemporary theological discussion.

II

This essay is written to call forth reaction and response. It hopes to make some contribution toward the breaking down of the barriers and fear of theological debate within our circles. We need to renew among ourselves a spirit of healthy *Aus-einandersetzung*, a spirit which has its roots deep within the Lutheran theological tradition. That the give-and-take of open theological discussion has significantly decreased on the American Lutheran scene is to this writer more disturbing than welcome.⁹ Historically Lutheranism has seen itself confessionally to represent a middle alternative to the Roman Catholic and the Calvinist traditions. This Lutheran alternative has traditionally called for and respected healthy debate, and in the interest of truth this condition should be extended in our own time, especially by and among Lutherans. The Lutheran Confessional writings of the 16th century arose out of a context of controversy. The writers of these documents did not claim that only they had the truth, for only Christ alone is "the eternal truth."¹⁰ The Reformers intended first of all to set forth their position and to call forth honest and open response from their opponents; their writings bear witness to their disappointment

⁹ The new journal *Dialog* is a respectable exception here; that it is an exception, however, proves the rule. Nevertheless, even with *Dialog* there also lies the possibility of developing a "party spirit," which must be guarded against in the interest of fruitful discussion.

¹⁰ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, VII, 43, 47.

and frustration when they were not met with such response.

With regard to the contemporary theological scene, it is American Lutheranism that is in the most advantageous position to foster theological discussion. Its historical roots give it a direct bond to European church life and theology. In the case of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, whose founders came to America 130 years ago, it has direct access, by virtue of its language tradition, to the great movements of German theology over the past 100 years. This, along with its involvement in the philosophical and theological traditions of the English-speaking world, has produced a rich legacy that challenges contemporary American Lutheranism toward earnest and creative theological exchange. The need for entering into such discussion has certainly been seen by theologians outside the Lutheran tradition.¹¹ It would be unfortunate if this need were left unnoticed by our generation.

Rather than to be feared and shunned, a spirit of *Auseinandersetzung* must also be nurtured among our own theologians. Recent polls among seminary students have shown the need for interdisciplinary dialog. There always has been a certain amount of tension between systematic theology and exegesis, and this tension will no doubt

¹¹ Cf. the work of James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., in editing the *New Frontiers in Theology* series, an attempt at narrowing the gap between Continental and American theology; or the translation of the *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* into English; or the forthcoming translation of Hans Lietzmann's *Handbuch zum neuen Testament* into English; or the contributions made by Robinson, Shubert Ogden, Amos Wilder, Gabriel Vahanian and the late Kendrick Grobel to the 1964 Bultmann *Festschrift, Zeit und Geschichte*, ed. by Erich Dinkler (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1964).

continue. But this need not be a lamentable situation. Surely the tension becomes all the more uncomfortable if one discipline ignores the work of the other. Systematics and exegesis are partners on the path to truth; they do not offer two separate paths. As Professor Jaroslav Pelikan has recently pointed out:

If we are to hear and hearken to the Word of God, we shall need not only to show a deep regard for the theological tradition but also to give fraternal consideration to our theological contemporaries; not only the fathers but also the brethren must be given an opportunity to speak.¹²

Perhaps a varied approach to a particular current theological problem could be offered in the pages of the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY.

It should be said that giving the appearance of total agreement where there is no total agreement is only a ruse. In the long run this contributes nothing to the maturity of the church. A sign of maturity is the recognition of and respect for diversity within the church. Diversity within permissible limits is *not* an unhealthy element in the church, especially if such diversity can bring forth the give-and-take of mature discussion. After all, Christians are also human beings, who have differing backgrounds, outlooks, opinions, and temperaments. They are not machines, performing alike in every detail. Certainly the Christian Gospel does not ask us to start resembling machines; it frees us to be ourselves and allows us to accept both ourselves and others as human beings involved in the strife, the ambiguities, and the joys of be-

¹² "Fathers, Brethren, and Distant Relatives: The Family of Theological Discourse," CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, XXXIII (1962), 714.

ing human. Those who avoid entering into critical dialog with others merely give the impression that their own position is insecure.

What we are *not* calling for here is discussion simply for discussion's sake. The goal is a more worthy one than that, and discussion is only a means toward that goal. The goal is to underscore the church's mission to the world, a mission which calls it and its members into relevant involvement in the problems of the world. Some of the basic issues, both theological and social, of our contemporary world are simply not being confronted in our circles. The Christian laity is involved for 6½ days of the week in an ever advancing world; they must not be left with the feeling that the other one-half day is being spent in a backward church. It is a task of the church to equip its laity for confrontation with modern society; it is also a task of the church to demand of its theologians that they take steps to confront current developments in contemporary theology. The church possesses a worthy tradition, but her *raison d'être* is not to preserve her worthy tradition to a point where its content is no longer meaningful for today's society. This would be a betrayal of the Gospel itself. The Gospel also addresses the church and demands that she enter into dialog with the world, even if it has to be on the world's terms. Certainly this is what God has done in the cross of Jesus Christ.

We are not operating with a church-world dualism. The people of the church, and this means clergy as well as laity, are also people of the world. They share in both church and world. They should also share with each other their reactions to

both church and world. Such sharing through dialog with one another is an important part of the love for which Christ has asked among His followers. Paul Verghese writes:

The purpose of dialogue cannot be limited to mutual understanding alone; dialogue is only a stage on the path to love — love perfected and fulfilled in Christ. "That all may be one" is not simply a question of "Faith and Order" or of something to be settled by theologians in a series of warm, friendly and informal conversations.

Love is neither desiring the company of the other for the pleasure it gives, nor sacrificing oneself to make the other happy. Love always seeks the building up of the whole community, and is prepared to toil, think, feel, act, give and receive to that end.¹³

Theological discussion is not free from the threat of abuse. It can become, in the wrong hands, a means toward discord and hatred, toward tearing down instead of building up the whole community. The idea and practice of dialog is something which occupies the thinking of many who are involved in ecumenical activities today, and their reflection has produced results such as the following:

True dialogue requires (1) the possibility of addressing and being addressed, and a medium of communication; (2) liberation from the need for self-justification; the ability to face the other without apprehension or prejudice; (3) the willingness to enter into the inner life of the other, seeing the common situation from the side of the other as well as from one's own.¹⁴

¹³ "Will Dialogue Do?" *The Ecumenical Review*, XVIII (1966), 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Discussion, then, in such a spirit becomes one of the most demanding tasks facing the church today. Demanding because it means discipline, the discipline of Christian awareness and concern; demanding because it is a necessity for the church—among her own members and between herself and the world.

Perhaps now more than ever before is it necessary for the church and her theologians to follow her Lord and His apostles out *into the world*. The Great Commission *commits* the church not to introspection but to proclamation of God's love to the world, a love clearly expressed in John 3:16. But if the church is to say anything to the world, it ought to become intimately aware of its problems. And the answers of the church ought to wait until the church has heard the world's questions. The church's theologians may suddenly discover that some traditional answers simply do not fit the questions of today's men—that some questions are entirely new in the church's experience. The task of the church and her theologians, then, is not to turn away from the world but to listen to it, to love it as God loves it. The laity of the church also has membership in the world; the laity is close to the problems of the

world and can provide the clergy with vital insights into the thinking of the world. Today's minister will reap benefits for his own ministry from honest and open theological discussion with his laymen. Such discussion also offers the pastor another means for the "equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry" (Eph. 4:12), a ministry which occurs when these saints are sent out again into the world.

A "theology" for many things is being offered these days: a "theology of pastoral care," a "theology of grief," a "theology of work." Perhaps we need to concentrate just as diligently on a "theology of discussion." Discussion will always remain a vital part of our quest for truth, and a good "theology of discussion" will serve to point out that discussion does not simply produce discord. It may also have the positive merit of allowing the Christian brother to be *my* brother precisely when he disagrees, contradicts, and argues with me. It may remind us both that we are mutually seeing in a mirror dimly and knowing only in part but also that we are mutually seeking the truth in the name of Him who is the Truth.

Heidelberg, Germany