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Editorial

Theological Constructs: Eternality or Temporality?

SOMEONE SAGELY REMARKED that methodologies come and go while theologies abide forever. Educators might embrace the first part of that aphorism with a certain smugness born of professional experience and expertise. One suspects that few other than theologians would be willing to put their imprimatur on the second half of that statement. And not all theologians would agree to that! People who are personally and academically involved in that discipline which centers in "a word about God" are said these days to do theology. The fathers formulated theology, ecclesiasticians debated minute points of theology, professional neophytes studied theology, and a few students somewhere along the way actually learned theology. Today we do theology. That's an interesting way to put it. Linguistic devotees quickly remind us that "do" is an action word. Maybe that's what we need in theology today. At least it's reflective of the age in which we carry out our theological tasks. Augustine, Bernard and a truly imposing list of fathers and saints were both contemplativists and activists; perhaps some of our contemporary theologians ought to be more of both. Doing theology is apparently a bit more demanding than meditating upon theology, pondering it, or merely studying it.

People who do mathematics and economics and physics have certain constructs with which they operate. We are informed that science now has some thirty-four of them. In the epistemological pursuit the various disciples operate with constructs of their own. The relativists among the practitioners speak of constructs of temporality. They know that their constructs have no permanent validity. For they assume that exact knowledge will always be an impossibility. The absolutists, on the other hand, argue that constructs do enjoy permanent status. The reason why exact knowledge is deemed inaccessible is precisely because enduring constants are forsaken.

This issue impinges upon the theological enterprise. Do one's constructs relate directly to foundations of knowledge? Is there an indubitable and unchanging foundation for knowing? Or is this also relative?

Systematicians at one time argued as to whether theology is a science, system or a discipline. The stalwarts of Lutheran orthodoxy were generally willing to accept system and discipline as adequate definitional terms. Hollaz could write that theology, viewed as a system, is the doctrine concerning God which teaches man from the divine Word the true method of worshipping God in Christ. Gerhard preferred to speak of theology as a discipline, divinely-given to be sure, whereby a man not only understands the divine mysteries but is able also to communicate the heavenly truth to

others (which happens to be a sort of functional theology-doing). All of them felt a bit uneasy in speaking of theology as a science. Science dealt with *principia* and *media cognoscendi* which were quite different from those employed by theology. Interestingly enough, the older theologians wanted to avoid two dangerous undertakings: a proof of the Christian religion via logical, empirical or intuitive data, and an attendant confusion of faith and knowledge which genuine orthodoxy assiduously sought to avoid (in spite of the not-too-kind remarks one hears nowadays about "scholastic" Lutheranism and its intellectualization of the faith).

With what kind of constructs does theology really operate? Can theology speak of unchanging foundation? Dare it subscribe to a Cartesian single principle of highest and absolute certainty? Or must the theological quest be perennially engaged in the search for a modern "art of inquiry" which will lead into dimensions of heretofore unexperienced truth?

The theological relativist will resoundly reply in the affirmative. If theology is to keep pace with the potentialities of thought and the expansiveness of knowledge characteristic of our technocratic age it cannot afford to bind itself to concepts and constructs which were viable in a world-age and an epistemological order which no longer relates to reality. The theological absolutist, as might be expected, will react just as dogmatically in rejecting any and all kinds of construct-alteration. If one has an indubitable starting point, he reasons, one just does not sacrifice it or act as though he didn't possess it in the first place.

Both answers invite earnest scrutiny. The temporalist never quite knows where his theology is or where it is heading. (For some this is the healthiest brand of theology on the market). His *principia* are as unstable as his assumptions; his constructs as maleable as his apprehension of reality. Ultimately one theology is deemed as useful or as worthless as another. Operating with constructs of temporality the scientist can say: my science is as good as yours; my chemistry is as good as yours. After all, who can insist that it isn't? The theological temporalist ends up by asserting: my religion is as good as yours; my theology is as good as yours. By what criterion can one insist otherwise?

But the absolutist, insisting as he does upon the unchanging quality and nature of his constructs, often becomes guilty of a dogmatizing which congeals theology in rigid forms and formulations. Tragically, such dogmatizing can absolutely negate every attempt to capture a bit more of the fullness, richness, variety and multifaceted grandeur of a Biblically-oriented revelational theology. The Scriptures themselves are cast into molds from which they cannot free themselves.

In many a contemporary discipline work centers more in puzzles and problems than in givens, absolutes, constants, and knowables. Now theology has its constants and knowables; but it also has its puzzles and problems. And it ought to be free enough and

vibrant enough, within the bounds of the Biblical revelation, to seek new insights, new appreciations, new expressions, new concepts, and new constructs with which to speak meaningfully that unchanging "word about God" which must be spoken to every age.

Call it what you want: system, science, discipline, study, exercise. Theology is a fascinating enterprise. Those who do theology—and do it seriously—will operate with constructs. They will not be constructs of temporality, either the temporal or absolutist kind. They will be constructs of eternity: thoroughly Biblical constructs which alone can do justice to God's gracious revelation of himself to sinful, but redeemed mankind.

JOHN F. JOHNSON