

Editorial

What Kind of Seminary? (III)

Authentic Authenticity

ONE of the contemporary terms which like the Canon of old seems to be imposing itself upon the church is that admirably *existential* world, authentic. For some time it has been creeping into our literature; it has found its way into our sermons as well. Clergymen take delight in talking about authentic man, authentic religious experience, authentic possibility, authentic existence. They speak of a sort of Sartrean authentic selfhood attained via engagement in, commitment to, and concern for, a sort of Jasperian authentic community. One's initial reaction might be to consign the word and all of its dramatic concomitants to the phenomenon of existentialist jargon with the profound hope that it will soon run its due course and disappear.

A little reflection on the word bids us take it more seriously. Authentic implies, of course, that something can be inauthentic. An authentic religious experience suggests that some religious experience might not be quite genuine; authentic faith suggests that the faith some people talk about or even claim to have might not really be faith in the biblical sense at all. To speak of authentic possibility suggests that a man, even a Christian man, could be living out his days without fulfilling the potentialities of Christian existence which are his because by grace he is now *in Christo*.

So I submit that instead of removing the enchanting word from our ecclesiastical vocabulary we ought rather to introduce still another term. The time has come to speak of *authentic authenticity*. Perhaps what certain philosophers and theologians settle for when it comes to deciding the authenticity of life or existence or selfhood or religion is really not adequate—at least when judged by biblical affirmations. The authenticity claimed for possibility, community, being, and all the other familiar expressions must be carefully examined to determine whether it is actually authentic.

Such a determination might be made by the introduction (really the reinstatement and reinforcement) of some other terms—key words that are unquestionably basic to religion and life. One such word is "God" (even though Ian Ramsey says the Christian could not get along with this single word as his key word), the God who is known in objective as well as in subjective self-disclosure and who at the same time refuses to be merged into identity with the evidences of his revelation; the God whose authenticity is not given to him by man, but in his own authenticity gives of himself to man: the God self-revealing and self-giving in Christ, the only mediator and reconciler between himself and mankind.

Another such word is "sin," which is disorder, imbalance, alienation and separation precisely because it is always alienation and falling away from the God who created man to live in order

and harmony with himself and who stands in judgment over-against the man who fails to do so. Another word is "salvation." Call it salvation-existence because it is a wholeness, a restorative recall effected by a gracious God "through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." Another such word is "ethic," the Spirit-impelled response of being and life to the Christ who dwells in man by faith; an ethic that rejects Sartre's "life as useless passion" in favor of a life which is lived out under passion, the passionate enthusiasm (in-Godness) which does not argue *de tertio usu legis* because it is gripped and energized by the dynamic, living, acting force which Luther calls faith. In such an ethical life the living Christ is present. To paraphrase Bonhoeffer, Christ finds his own form as he takes form among men who are conformed to the form of authentic human existence which was embodied in his own life *pro nobis*.

Authentic existence is selfhood inseparably grounded in the living God who in Christ has given victory over the *eschaton* of death; it is selfhood which by *existentiel* commitment is united to the Christ who is always at the center of life. To speak of authenticity apart from these terms and convictions is to speak of inauthentic authenticity.

The relevance of all this to the program, purpose and philosophy of a theological seminary is, of course, inescapably obvious. A seminary must be vitally concerned about its theology. It must communicate a truly authentic Gospel, remembering that it can never be satisfied with a principle or theological category which fails to uphold its fullness, integrity and power. It must inculcate a truly authentic confessionism which sharply distinguishes between *norma normans et normata* while tenaciously clinging to both. Such a task becomes particularly pertinent when a segment of contemporary culture claims with Nietzsche that authentic being means freedom from all religious illusions.

A seminary must be concerned to produce messengers of the everlasting Gospel who are themselves grounded in the God who addresses them in the Word of Scripture, personally committed to the Christ in whom they have found authentic existence, and members of that community of faith which is the "section of humanity in which Christ has really taken form." Such a concern is witness to the truth that the seminary is not only academic and ecclesiastic-oriented; the seminary is also person-oriented.

The president of Princeton Theological Seminary recently stated that the church and society can be no stronger than the theological schools they build. The church and the world will be edified as its seminaries show authentic concern for the men whom it prepares and for the Word with which it prepares them. In this way it will continue to lead men to the Christ whom to know in faith is authentic life indeed!

John F. Johnson, Associate Professor of Systematic
Theology, Director of Seminary Relations