

## 2. Theologies

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Never in history were there so many differing theologies claiming to be authentic interpretations of Christianity as in our contemporary age. The privilege to hold a specific theology is not only claimed by church bodies with differing confessional stances, but also by individual theologians of one and the same church. It is said to be a sign of man's coming of age when a theologian interprets his faith according to his own self-understanding, and is open to allow others to do the same. One wonders whether this is also the meaning of the suggestion made by Section II of the V Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, where it states, that "in our search for unity today we must not insist upon uniformity in theological formulations and in practice" but must use the variations "rooted in the Scriptures to help bring together divided groups of people in the world into 'one body with many members.'" (LWI 40/70,2.)

When the Lutheran Confessors claim that it is possible to reach a "unanimous consensus and exposition of our Christian faith" (Intro., FC, 4), they certainly think of theology in a different way than those who defend a multiplicity of possible theologies. The difference may certainly not be objectively described by the affirmation that one group uses Scripture as their authoritative text while the others don't, since any "Christian" theology claims its relation to Scripture in some way. But when theologians claim that the multiplicity of theologies is due to the nature of the Biblical witness itself, they certainly do have a different understanding of Scripture than that of the Confessors.

To illustrate the difficulty which exists in today's theological world, where not even the use of the same language does imply that one says the same thing, an affirmation of Professor Gerhard Ebeling may serve. Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Tuebingen, he says that "the Gospel has and gives free access to a multiplicity of traditions, without having to be confused with any one of them."<sup>1</sup> One has to learn from extensive reading of his works that Ebeling uses the word "Gospel" in a very personal meaning. In this context it does not designate one of the four Gospels of the New Testament, nor does it have the meaning of the objective Good News which is transmitted in Scripture. Ebeling uses the word "Gospel" to describe a subjective revelation of God as a God of love, which happens in man through a "word-event." "Gospel" can never be transmitted or conserved, it can only happen subjectively, according to Ebeling. This "Gospel" permits a multiplicity of traditions and expresses itself in multiple forms.

Ebeling continues: "For the Gospel makes use of Tradition in many ways: the various forms of Christian witness and Christian preaching; the *verbum visibile* of sacramental ritual; the kerygmatic patterns; the orders and services of the *ekklesia*; the authoritative texts; the tradition of theological interpretation; Christian ethics; it permeates the whole breadth of life in ethics, culture, and history."<sup>2</sup> In this list of possible traditions which may be used by "Gospel", Scripture is mentioned as the "authoritative texts." "Gospel" is understood as the subject's realization that God is only Love, which from another point of view coincides with man's eschatological self-understanding of faith. This Gospel, or God's Word in man, happens, according to Ebeling, through any true, authentic human word, since language itself is the sign of man's image of God. But it needs the witness of faith of others to happen again. This faith, which is the constant in Christianity, may express itself in

a multiplicity of forms, so that even a multiplicity of Christologies is possible, since faith itself has no specific content. Faith is reduced to man's final self-understanding before a God who is problematical.

The position of Ebeling might be considered an extreme exception, but it is not. He considers himself a conservative in view of other theological trends. And certainly he does not go as far as Herbert Braun, or as Richard Shaull, but far enough to prove that his theology is being developed exclusively from the viewpoint of a "worldly talk of God," as he himself calls it. For him, as for most of the modern theologians, a supernatural understanding of God became problematical in view of the thesis of secularization. The pressure of scientific research, which supposedly is achieved without the help of a supernatural God, requires, according to this thesis, man's coming of age also in religious matters, so that theology can no longer speak of divine interference in human matters and history. God has to be found in the human environment, and only there.

The Confessors certainly thought of a different theology when they confessed that they reached a "unanimous consensus and exposition of our Christian faith." They knew about the possibility of producing a "worldly talk of God," but they understood that this knowledge of God which man could produce by his own possibilities was not able to produce a theology that could help man in any way. Theology was thought of by the Confessors as a "godly talk of the world", if one may use these words. That is, they understood that theology was not to be interpreted as man's tentative identification of God, but as God's revelation of Himself to man. This disclosure of God to man, by which God established His gracious presence with man, did, for the Confessors, not only happen in Biblical times through His mighty acts, but happens still today through His mighty Word. They understood that this Word of God for the man of today was Holy Scripture. Since they understood that the only possible identification of God was given by Holy Scripture, they accepted Scripture as providing, not only the gracious presence of God, but truth expressed in such a form of human language that one could reach a "unanimous consensus and exposition of our Christian faith" all through history.

Since the Confessors accepted theology from the perspective of God, they were able to affirm only one theology and pronounce a "damnamus" on all others. If one makes theology from the perspective of man, one has no authority to pronounce a "damnamus." From the perspective of man the identification of God is impossible, and this means to continue under the judgment of God, not under His grace.

### **Milestones In The Development Of "Theologies"**

1. The German period of Enlightenment may be called the first significant milestone in the development of differing theologies within Lutheranism. This is the period of time in which most standards of human life and thinking were re-examined. During the second half of the eighteenth century not even theology did escape from this examination. It was asked about the meaning and the necessity of religion, and the answer was that religion could not be justified as a doctrine or a theological reflection, but only on the basis of its significance for life and for the *praxis pietatis*. To be meaningful, religion had to provide ethical standards and improve the world and benefit man as a moral being.

On the basis of this principle Johann Salomo Semler examined Scripture. He accepted, as Word of God, only those texts which he considered directly aiming at the improvement of mankind. All others he called only holy writings. This brought about the distinction between Word of God and Holy Scripture in the Bible. Scripture was no longer accepted as God's revelation as a whole, but human criticism was now called to be the judge according to anthropological standards.

2. A second milestone we may find at the time of the German Idealism, especially through the influence of Hegel. In his effort to understand reality

as a whole, Hegel included also theology in his philosophical system. God, world and man were seen in one spiritual relation. This understanding of reality marked the theological impulses of Schleiermacher, who developed a theology with the presupposition that faith is reduced to the self-understanding of existence. This self-understanding, which Schleiermacher calls affection (*Gefuehl*), is able to apprehend God and the world. This concentration of theology on the existence of man led to a rupture with the supernaturalistic understanding of Scripture.

Since this time, theology received the marks of existentialist thinking. God is being spoken of according to the pattern or human self-understanding. Idealism affirmed that the human mind apprehends and projects reality, not that reality imposes itself on man. From this point of view, man would have the possibility of understanding and even of projecting the relation God-world-man by and from himself. It puts Scripture as revelation on a secondary plane, subject to discussion and correction. From the point of view of this anthropological optimism, characteristic of Idealism, the human side of Jesus became very important, and the human side of Scripture was overemphasized. This idealistic optimism still pervades modern theology. It does not consider the seriousness of the fact that man and all his achievements stand under judgment before God.

3. The third milestone is marked by the concept of liberty. Luther's thesis of the freedom of the Christian man was no longer understood as a given freedom, given through the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, but as a natural freedom of man. This concept of freedom was so general, that it developed into a theological liberalism. Truth was no longer given by God, but had to be achieved by responsible analysis of reality. Truth and reason became subject to historical development. The doctrinal statements of Scripture, and especially the later formulations of the tradition of the Church, were submitted to the criterion of intellectual honesty.

a) David Friedrich Strauss introduced the idea that theology is independent of its historical setting. So he distinguishes in his book of the "Life of Jesus", published in 1835, between the man Jesus and the theology which distorted this historical human figure. Strauss' point of departure is the idealistic heritage of human optimism. The central idea of religion was for Strauss the reconciliation between God and man. But he did not receive this reconciliation as a message from God through the salvation effected by Jesus Christ, but as part of the natural structure of the human truth-creating mind. Reconciliation was interpreted as man's intellectual apprehension of the God-world-man relation, as it reappears later in Gerhard Ebeling and Henri Perrin, who counsel us to find our salvation by penetrating deeper and deeper into ourselves.

Strauss held that this idea of reconciliation was common to the primitive Christianity. In their theological efforts they tried to visualize this idea on one individual man, Jesus Christ. According to Strauss the evangelists who wrote these stories did not only memorize the sayings of those who at that time revered Jesus, but acted themselves creatively, introducing also their own theology. To stress a theological point, they had recurrence to mythical trappings and historical inaccuracies. But, according to Strauss, this does not invalidate the theological message.

Ferdinand Christian Baur developed the same presuppositions of Strauss on a more scientific level. According to Baur the historical information of Scripture is not accurate and needs not to be so, since the important factor in Scripture is the theological idea.

Most of these features are common in modern theology. Willi Marxsen, who considers himself a good spokesman of modern theology, gives in his pamphlet "Der Streit um die Bibel," an average pattern of modern methods of interpretation of Scripture. He continues the tradition of Baur and gives free play to the critical historical method. As Baur, he affirms that the historical inaccuracy of the Bible does not destroy its theological message. The

argument is that an historical judgment is not equal to a theological judgment. The thesis seems to be logical, but it ignores the fact that God revealed Himself in exact and specific historical actions, described in reliable propositional statements. If the historical affirmations are not reliable, the theological affirmations have no value at all, except in the case where theological affirmations are understood as variable subjective speculations on a given theme. The Confessors understood that the theology of Scripture was given in lasting propositional truth, while Marxsen, interpreting the general theological scene of today, advocated the position that Scripture only conveys general theological ideas which are subject to development and differing interpretation.

For Marxsen the major issue in Scripture is Jesus, in whom the writers of the New Testament localize historically the idea of the encounter with God. Each of the writers creates his own theology around this principle. This proves for Marxsen that history does not matter at all.

The theological implication of this viewpoint becomes clear when Marxsen describes the difficulty of the Evangelists to speak of the supposed mystery of Jesus' encounter with God. For him Mark describes the mystery of Jesus in a Jewish fashion, describing his encounter with God in the historical setting of His Baptism, where God adopts Him as His Son, while Luke and Matthew use the Hellenistic thought pattern and describe Jesus' mysterious encounter with God in another mythical figure, namely in His direct descent from God through the stories of His miraculous birth. For Marxsen no one of these historical settings is real. The important factor for Marxsen is that the message of the encounter with God does not get lost in the mythical trappings.

The Confessors ignore completely this myth of modern theology which speaks of Jesus' encounter with God. For them Jesus *was* God, the incarnate Son of God, as identified by God Himself all through Scripture. But the freedom from historical accuracy, introduced scientifically by Baur, by which the Biblical writers are granted the permission to falsify history for the sake of a theological idea, gives the theologian today the freedom from all Confessional and dogmatic formulations.

b) It has to be noted that this first period of theological liberalism in Germany was followed by a reaction of those who wanted a confessional Lutheranism and went back to Scripture as God's revelation to man. Among this group developed the personality of Dr. C. F. W. Walther, the great leader of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

But in Germany the main theological trend continued to be liberal and developed new facets which became important for the development of new theologies. The importance of Albrecht Ritschl in this development is realized only through his re-interpretation by Wilhelm Herrmann, the teacher of Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. Ritschl decided that only that has a right in theology which comes to experience through faith. But he still wanted to make a theology in the established church and according to its principles. Wilhelm Herrmann, on the other hand, operated on new principles, which became a standard for most of the modern theologians. He teaches that the theologian cannot operate on presuppositions which are not developed by the theologian's own, free, and lively insight. Only that which develops freely from faith may be the object of faith. Nothing else may be established as standard, not the authenticity of the New Testament writings, nor the formulas of the Confessions. Everything has to be open to free acknowledgment by faith and to free scientific discovery of truth. And with this affirmation Herrmann executes the heritage of Ritschl: Nothing belongs to theology which does not come from experience and does not prove its truthfulness through experience.

In the last analysis Herrmann bases faith on faith, and reduces Christianity to the autonomy of faith, a characteristic which becomes more apparent in the theologies of Gerhard Ebeling and Paul Tillich. For Herrmann this autonomy is developed on the basis of the inner life of the historical Jesus, who serves as an example of freedom and authenticity.

Modern theology assimilated this principle of Wilhelm Herrmann. If each theologian has to operate on the basis of those presuppositions which flow from his own understanding of faith and the scientific discovery of truth, Scripture and the Confessions may indeed be considered as valid interpretations of theology for the theologians of that time, but they are in no sense binding for the theologians of today who live in a secularized scientific age, where all supernatural relations become problematical, according to the thesis of Friedrich Gogarten. These theologians do not consider that they stand under judgment before God. Their identification of God is made from the viewpoint of man. But God has to be identified by Himself, not by human standards.

c) A third facet of this liberal tradition becomes evident in the development of the History of Religions School. The thesis of this school was that in the examination of the Biblical witness any similarity with other religions had to be interpreted in favor of those religions. Through the scientific effort of this school the sayings of Jesus and the witness of the Apostles were submerged piece by piece into the stream of the religious thought which filled the world of the New Testament and from which the New Testament writers borrowed their ideas. Most of the New Testament sayings were not accepted as authentic and specific Christian theology.

Adolf von Harnack became known by his famous criticism of the Apostolic Creed. He pleaded for the substitution of the Creed by a shorter formula, which, according to him, would translate the authentic Christian faith without the historical discrepancies which the Apostolic Creed contains. So he eliminated the formula: "who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary" with the argument that the primitive Christianity wanted only to express the idea that the origin of the Gospel, as well as the origin of its central figure, was mysterious.

Johannes Weiss develops this method of the History of Religions School and demonstrates that the idea of the Kingdom of God comes from Persian religions, that Baptism comes from the mystery cults, that half of what Paul said may be traced back to primitive paganism.

4. An intermediate position was taken by the theologians who defend a Salvation History. Many confessional theologians of today find that the pattern of a Salvation History is able to reconcile the concerns of the historical criticism and the question of revelation. They agree that God acted in the world and so has a history with His people. God reveals Himself historically by His mighty acts, and through Jesus Christ. But for most of these theologians the revelation of God is restricted to acts and does not include words, so that Scripture cannot be considered a propositional revelation of God to the man of today. Jesus is the Word of God in action, the Apostles may have received a special inspiration, but the writers of Scripture, especially those of the New Testament, were not inspired. Their writings are only reports of the preaching of the early community about the mighty acts of God in history.

The theory of Salvation History is not logical, because it recognizes God's revelation in acts and denies *a priori* that God may have acted particularly at the inspiration of Scripture, by using the gifts which God Himself gave to the holy writers. These theologians want us to take seriously the mighty acts of God which are transmitted by what they consider unreliable witnesses to these acts of God.

5. Certain aspects of this theory of Salvation History crystallized in what is known as the Form Criticism and Tradition History, two theories which are complementary. The aim of Form Criticism is to discover the original form of the scriptural witness, free it from supposed later additions, and determine its development from earlier oral or written sources. The history of the pre-literary form is examined by the Tradition History, Augustin Cardinal Bea, in his book "The Study of the Synoptic Gospels," has pointed to the fact that this kind of procedure does not necessarily invalidate the principle of propositional inspiration by God, since God used the writers with their abilities and studies as Luke testifies in Acts 1:1. But acknowledgment of verbal in-

spiration was not part of the presuppositions of those who developed Form Criticism. For these men Scripture was recognized as a collection of sermons, and each writer collected not only the theological expressions of the early church but contributed creatively with his own theology, so that one cannot equate Scripture with the Word of God. This theory was already defended by Johann Salomo Semler, so that one may close the circle of milestones where it began.

### Some Contemporary Theologies

In their effort to reach an encounter with God through what they call "pure" faith, that is, through faith without an identifying content, the modern theologians have missed the most important of all issues, namely the correct identification of the God with whom man needs to have a gracious encounter. Many theologians present a description of Christian faith in which it is impossible to recognize Christianity at all. In a very brief characterization we attempt to identify some of the present-day theologies.

1. It is true that Karl Barth saw that the important issue in man's relation with God was his correct identification of God. For him God identified Himself in Scripture. His theology is developed from the point of view of God, that is, that God, the "wholly other," as Barth calls Him, reveals Himself in a supernaturalistic way to man. Barth even denies any possibility of a natural knowledge of God. God is, for Barth, so wholly other that not even faith is able to bridge the gap between God and man. Faith is only a "jump into a vacuum," since man is only able to stand in respect before God, but never to commune with God. In respect before God man has to order his life. For this reason Barth's theology developed into an ethical system, but was not able to identify the God of Scripture, the God who became man in Jesus Christ and enters human life through faith.

2. Bultmann says that Jesus is the Word of God for us, the point which he wants to make is that there is now a *message* which questions my existence as man and calls for a decision in my life. This self-understanding which is reached in the decision of faith supersedes the domination of the former misunderstandings in my existence before God. The reality of salvation does not depend on *facts* which lie behind the *kerygma*, but salvation is in the preaching of the message itself. Faith itself is the truth of the message, since faith depends on itself and has the character of a risk. In his intention to purify the message, Bultmann reduces it to the religious idea of encounter with God; but destroying the historical revelation of God by which He reveals and identifies Himself, Bultmann misses the most important of all: the correct identification of God.

3. Gerhard Ebeling, as the systematician of the Bultmann School, does not have the exegetical interest in Scripture which Bultmann had. It is not even important for his theological system, since only one aspect is central for his understanding of faith, namely the historical figure of Jesus, or more specifically, Jesus' faith. The fact is that there is only a God of love, a God of love who is always present with man through the happening of word itself. Where this word is executed in the right way, it reveals that God is love. This self-understanding is then said to be faith. It opens a new future for man.

Ebeling uses the terminology of traditional theology and wants to proclaim the results of the Christian message, namely that God is love, without taking into account the cost of this love of God in Jesus Christ. Ebeling does not consider the seriousness of the accusations of the Law, nor the fact that man stands in judgment before God. In his clearing effort he cleared God away, instead of identifying Him as God identified Himself in Scripture.

4. Braun is willing to substitute for Christ any message or personality which would bring about the encounter with the "wherefrom of my being urged", as he calls God. The central issue is the same as that of the existentialist school: man needs a new self-understanding. Where it comes from is not the important question.

From this point of view to a theology of Marxism, or a theology of revolution the way is short. Richard Shaull, in his theology of revolution, insists that there is not only a necessary revolution of love in Christianity, but that Christians, if necessary, have to engage in material revolution against social standards and political systems. This justifies the Church's interference in political affairs and gives the Christian the right and the duty to change the establishment even by force.

5. The theology of Juergen Moltmann is in some way dependent on the philosophy of hope of Ernst Bloch. In his theology of hope Moltmann does not identify God as the coming of the true humanity in the same way as Bloch does, but the coming of God is made possible in the true humanity of Jesus. Jesus is for Moltmann only a Jew, but God promises true and new humanity through Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus opens a new future to man, so that the believer may expect the fulfillment of God's promises with the resurrection of man.

Moltmann's theology of hope is certainly an answer to the authoritative theology of existentialism and opens the way for an eschatology which is not imminent in this world. But he does not identify the God of Jesus Christ as God identifies Himself in Scripture.

### One Theology

God really gave enough evidence in Scripture to the fact that there is only *one* possible correct identification of God, and that there is only *one* theology in the Old and New Testaments. As soon as the Israelites deviated a little bit from this identification God punished them, exhorted them, called them to repent. So, when God saved His people in Egypt, He required from His people the sacrifices to remember this salvation and to expect the final salvation in the Lamb of God who was promised. But when the people offered these very same sacrifices according to all the rules established, God rejected their sacrifices during the time of the prophets because they identified God in a wrong way. The people understood at this time that God was satisfied with external sacrifices. But God demonstrated through the prophets that He was a God who wanted their heart, their faith, their trust in His promises, for which the sacrifices were only a symbol.

The same happened again with the Pharisees at the time of Jesus. How often He had to identify God as the God who wanted to live in their hearts by faith, and was not satisfied by external and human standards of changes and behavior. It is not possible to make theologies from the point of view of man. There is only one possible theology: the one which is given from the perspective of God Himself. The Confessors understood that this *theologia revelata* was given in Scripture in such a form of exact and truthful language that it was possible to speak of and insist on one "unanimous consensus and exposition of our Christian faith."

From this perspective Francis Pieper, one of the fathers of The Missouri Synod, oriented his theological work and teaching. He starts from the presupposition that God is, and that He revealed Himself clearly in truthful theology in the words of Scripture. Pieper understands that the God who created language is not dumb, but that He speaks clearly to man in Scripture. The God who spoke His Word to the writers continues until today with this Word, so that it is the means through which God communicates Himself in His grace to man in faith. This sacramental character of the Word makes it also wholly reliable, so that it is possible to identify God correctly through this Word. If one looks at Scripture from this perspective of God, which certainly is supernaturalistic and has to be so by necessity, one does not find myths, legends, and other impossible affirmations in Scripture. It certainly does not solve all exegetical problems, but it allows the Christian to identify God as He wants to be identified. It allows the Christian to have a certainty of faith, and to agree with the Confessors that it is possible to reach a "unanimous consensus and exposition of our Christian faith."

The diversity of Scripture and the possibility of differing theologies exist

only where the anthropological perspective is chosen. But then it is not possible to differentiate these supposed "Christian" theologies from Buddhism, Marxism, and all other kinds of religious and philosophical speculations. These theologies are not able to identify the God who loved us in Jesus Christ, His only-begotten Son, since they do not allow God to speak to them Himself in Scripture and to enter their lives by a God-given faith.

**FOOTNOTES**

<sup>1</sup>Gerhard Ebeling, *The Word of God and Tradition*, trans. S. H. Hooke (Phil.: Fortress Press, 1968), p. 146.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 147.