

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

BOOK REVIEW

Biblical Studies

Church History

Systematic Theology

Ecumenics and Comparative Theology

Comparative Religion and Missions

Practical Theology (Including

Homiletics and Worship)

Religious Education

The Church in the World

HOMILETICS

Editorial ✠

THE MISSION AND MINISTRY OF STAMPING OUT ILLITERACIES

Expatriate missionaries in Ogoja province in Nigeria record and record again spoken words and phrases and discourses in tribal languages and area dialects. Wycliffe translators in Middle America invest countless hours in inventing an alphabet or devising a syntax. Bible society linguistic experts in the Philippine uplands or in New Guinea mountain enclaves search ceaselessly for idioms and equivalents as they reduce a language to writing and begin one more distinguished translation task. All these and many others are tackling endemic illiteracy as a formidable barrier in the preliterate or simply illiterate society to the full communication of the Gospel of Jesus and the Resurrection.

Functional illiteracy is nearer and more serious. In an earlier day it often marked the harried immigrant from eastern Europe or western Asia. Now it may be the burden carried by a "graduate" of a disadvantaged school, the almost unemployable wandering worker, the early school dropout. The passionate pulp and picture magazine fonder and the hypnotized TV tube watcher can come close, too close for comfort.

Even the higher learning in America is encumbered or impeded by the higher illiterates. They see. They hear. They even read. But they will not understand. They have the basic tools. They may use the basal skills. They may even try to develop good reading habits early in the successive stages of reading development. But they reach and stay on an early plateau in the daily exchange with life instead of stretching upward to maturity.

More often than not this is more than an individual problem to be remedied or corrected. It reflects and anchors to the culture level of the bookless (and Bibleless!) home. In walk-up flat or luxury apartment, in rural farm house, urban row house or suburban planned slum, few books are looked upon as family possessions or valuable individual property. Between air sweeteners and air conditioning, books are not viewed as vital ingredients for sustaining the atmosphere of a home. Sometimes books may be regarded as good bridges between the worlds: the world of ideas, the world of things, and the world of persons and events. Rarely are books construed as steady builders of the inner resources of one, to say nothing of the meaningful connections between many. The emptiness and the chill require for both secular and sacred scriptures the fervent offsetting petition "that we may . . . hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them."

But an epidemic variety of illiteracy remains a potent threat. It can affect workers in any vocation. Its contagion is particularly virulent in the learned professions, entrance into which is gained by those possessing initially an esoteric and difficult body of knowledge secured through prolonged and specialized training and whose individual practitioners enjoy the prerogatives of great personal freedom and professional independence. Sometimes the epidemic strikes an individual early; some begin to be moribund on the day of graduation. Sometimes it steals in gradually as a welter of nonprofessional ele-

ments weakens resistance. Sometimes it strikes suddenly; the instant cure and the platitudinous panacea no longer help. Sometimes hardening of the concepts sets in and neither a geometrical increase in knowledge relevant to the work nor the changing circumstances demanding different and varied discharge of demanding responsibilities can be met. Occasionally it manifests itself as the slow drift into the luxurious laziness of unhindered atrophy of complex skills and priceless habits of intake properly intended for the work of a lifetime.

What of the man of God, by churchly ordination a man of the Book of books and by relentless speaking and writing and communication output, willy-nilly, a man of letters and user of language? How can he escape the threat of ministerial illiteracy?

Hopefully he knows the futility of believing that his program of studies, prescribed or elective, has "covered the subject." When new books of theology, near theology, pseudotheology, and nontheology flood the market, he knows even as a neophyte, that he enjoys no monopoly over ministerial knowledge or ecclesiastical function. Regardless of special interest or unusual ability, he endeavors to keep intellectually alive and broadly informed. He plans his reading and schedules his studies and sees to it that a substantial portion of his reading and study are in subjects not directly related to his vocation alone. "For every theological or professional book we read, we should read at least two books of more general intention." (Richard Roberts)

His ministry and his mission are dedicated to the relentless warfare against his own professional illiteracy, creeping in stealthily or thundering in at a gallop. He fosters his own ability to relate ideas found on the printed page to the life around him. He pursues a private, searching dialog which tests the relevance of what he reads to his own personal spiritual experience, to the lives of those he deals with pastorally, and to the behavior of individuals and various human groupings and communities. He raises for himself sharp, "two-edged" questions which probe for new meaning, test for accuracy and validity, push for penetration, and weigh implications. He sees in the genuinely literate professional life an opportunity to seize the present moment to extract from past experience what is needed for God's tomorrow in grace.

The religious routinist may gain and even maintain possession of the honorific titles of the holy ministry through successive moves when his one professional barrel is emptied. The charlatan, with T. S. Eliot's "vocabulary for everything and exact ideas about nothing," may sound forth loud and long. The ecclesiastical jack-of-all-trades may practice encroachment on the domains of other professions. But the pastor-theologian (not the conference orator who begins each pontification with "I'm not a theologian, but . . .") who purposes to be and remain spiritually humble, intellectually alert, professionally adaptable, and increasingly proficient, will accept as his own the greatest responsibility for his own continuing education.

In this lifelong endeavor he needs and welcomes expert help, the kind of help which his professional journals facilitate and expedite with scholarly articles, up-to-date bibliographies of the type represented by this issue, judicious and balanced book reviews. The principle of selectivity in critical application should reduce and organize the prob-

lems of selection, timing, and budgeting. Another man's judgment can both whet the appetite or dampen enthusiasm otherwise uncontrolled. The summer months often present extra hours which can be filled with purposeful reading.

Help stamp out theological illiteracy! Both the prevention and the cure are deliciously palatable. And for the evident impact on your most characteristic professional acts in mission and ministry the people of God will increasingly pray, praise, and give thanks.

WALTER F. WOLBRECHT