

Towards a Biblical Theology

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God's message through His Spokesmen is perennially vital and challenging and it is also the responsibility of each age to re-examine and formulate its own understanding of the incomprehensible mystery so that the mystery may be made relevant to itself. If it fails to do so, it becomes fossilized in the ancient formulations once so vital and powerful for another age but now inadequate to express much more than an example of one period's delving into the mystery.

The widest possible meaning that anyone could give to the term theology would seem to be "talking about God." Yet, even that apparently simple definition was not an ordinary function of mankind until very late in its long history. Men talked about gods before they talked about God, and about mysterious forces before they talked about the gods acting behind them. They may even have begun to talk *about* the force-explaining gods only after they became conscious of failing to talk *with* them.

In St. John's prologue the Word, the Logos, is presented as existing before the beginning with the God, the Theos (Jn 1.1). These are the two terms that make up the word theology, but John also expresses here a relationship more basic to man's theologizing than talking, or thinking, or speculating about God. The Word was *pros ton Theon*; He existed in an uncreated and eternal intimacy with the Father, an idea clarified in the prologue's last verse: no man has seen God, ever, but the only Son who always was "into the Father's heart," that one can tell all about Him and lead those who believe in His message to share the same relationship, the eternal being-with the Father (Jn. 1.18). The Logos doesn't just see the Theos; He doesn't merely observe Him and thus know all about Him; He lives in intimate union with the Father and from that vantage He fulfills His historical function as the spoken Word by telling those who listen that God is love. The ultimate revelation of God comes from the union existing

between the Father and the Son, not from the observation of God as an object of knowledge.

Take also the disciple whom Jesus loved, who hovered over Him as Jesus yearned to lay His life down for His sheep, thus establishing His own and His Father's glory (Jn 13.23-32). That preferred disciple is Jesus' witness to the world precisely because he was Jesus' beloved one dwelling in an intimate union with Him. Hence, he knows about Judas beforehand, he is the first to believe in the Resurrection, the first to recognize the Lord in the miraculous haul of fish, and the one for whom Jesus has special plans that He does not even reveal to Peter. "This is the disciple, the very one who is the witness to these things, the one who has written about them, and we [the Church] know his testimony is true" (Jn 21.20-24). "He [i.e. the Lord] knows that he speaks true things so that you may believe more profoundly . . . that Jesus is the Christ, God's own Son, and that by believing you may have ever more securely the life that is in His name" (Jn 19.35b; 20.31b). This witness is known in the Church as John the Divine, the theologian without peer. Why so? Because he was with the Logos before he spoke about Him; he was at His table, next to His heart, at His Cross, next to His Mother, and the Blood and the Water.

John did not gaze upon the Word made flesh as one examines a distant galaxy or a colony of termites. His theology was a witnessing to the contact that he had with the Word of life, not a reasoned science. His theology was rooted in every coming of the Word into the world, in every communication of mystery from the bosom of the Father, brought to perfection in the coming of God's Son in weak flesh. He talked about God as His spokesman, not as a wonderer challenged by a problem; his theology is spokesmanship essentially and not something modeled on human science.

Is the voice of such a spokesman silent now? Or is it irrelevant? Has the investigator of God as an object of knowledge rather than a source of the communication of mystery taken the place of God's spokesmen in the modern Church? Or rather, is not the main function of any theologian, in any age, to absorb for himself the prophetic message and reformulate it in terms relevant to the world that surrounds him? And is this not the task of the searcher of God's own message as He Himself delivered it to us, the theologian called with more or less disdain the Biblical or positive theologian?

Prophecy in the strictest sense, i.e. the ultimate public revelation ordered to the welfare of all men and nations, has indeed reached its apex in

Jesus, the prophet-spokesman for God par excellence; in Him and in His Spirit, poured out upon His disciples, revelation has been completed. Hence, prophecy and witness-theology in this sense is a datum, something that has been fashioned in its fullness by the Word's definition of the Father as love, written in His Blood and Water, and in the Spirit breathed forth on those who believed in Him. Nothing, in a real sense, can be added to or subtracted from this historical action to which the whole universe is dynamically ordered.

Yet the culmination of all transferral of divine mystery to the human level that took place in Christ, though it is a datum, is not a dead thing, for it has been received by divinely regenerated men in whom God's unique Son continues to live and act and witness. It is a constitutive part of the divinely begotten organism called the Body of Christ, the Vinestock with its branches, and God's one, holy church. Such a communication of divine life and light could hardly have been intended by the benign Creator for one human period alone. Jesus Christ, the Father's re-creative message, once having re-created humanity, continues to uphold and sustain it in its supernal newness, just as the Creator continues to hold His creation outside the nothingness from which He called it by the same Word.

In this sense the datum of divine revelation given once for all times in Christ and His Spirit is a beginning, as the original creation was, a beginning that evolves and grows and adapts to new human needs, new human evil and misery. For it to become dried up and stultified is unthinkable. For it to be epitomized and completely codified in the formulas of any one age's understanding of it is to have it die with that dead age. Each age's reception of the Word has its own dynamic understanding of the Word, which emerges from the vibrancy of the message itself, but in no way is the Light and Life that once appeared among us and still dwells with us exhausted and captured completely by historical formulas.

It follows, therefore, that each new member of any human generation must come face to face with the Word's ultimate, but never exhausted, witnessing. From the original datum as transmitted to him by the Word in Scripture and in the sacred teaching community, each human must formulate his own individual response, a response that should make him ask at least, "And who is he [the Son of Man], Lord, that I may believe in him" (Jn 9.36). It must always be an inquiring response, one that never ignores the divinely guided responses of the Church in previous ages or the formulations of ancient teachers recognized by the Magisterium as having had special validity in their understanding of the "deposit of the faith." Yet,

it is only being just to the uniqueness of Christ's message to demand that this continuous response of every age and every individual be an inquiring one; otherwise, the awareness of the sustaining aliveness of Christ's message is lost, and one's faith and theology tends to be merely an attempt to exegete other faith-motivated but not revelational responses of ancient masters who were in their turn only trying to learn from the only Master. They were well aware that they hadn't exhausted His Teaching.

The further question is, where does one find the Lord to ask Him who He is and what He means for one schooled in the 20th century, the nuclear, galaxied, space age? Certainly, one must go to where He is, to the Temple where His glory dwells, His Body, no matter how fossilized it may have become by the human institutions it has not yet sloughed off. He is there among His chosen messengers and in the holy people they lead, even though the only purple He ever wore was the Roman soldier's dirty cloak, and the only crown, one made of thorns. One also finds Him in the poor, the hungry and naked, the lame and diseased of His world, and in the Macedonians who keep crying out to His Apostles, "Pass over to Macedonia, come help us" (Acts 16.9). He is in the anxious scientist fearful of nuclear horror fashioned by his own hand, in the pinched faces of Asia's swarming masses, and in the angry black man's face as he strives to have his God given dignity recognized.

Most of all one finds Him as Teacher and Message in what He has left of His direct witnessing, the only book He wrote, the Bible. Here is no formulation of merely man's understanding of His message. Here *is* the very Message itself, formulated by men, yes, but uniquely witnessed to by Him. His letter for all ages, for every man, this is what it is. And by it one comes in direct contact with the Divine Word. It is the sacrament constitutive of all Church pronouncement, an essential part of the Church, preserved by it as its own greatest gift from the true heavenly Bread that one must eat by coming to Him and believing in Him (Jn 6.35). It is the source of all valid theologizing, the basis of every theological system, the Rock on which He builds His sacred community for it comes through Christ and Peter and the others from the revelational power of the Father Himself and not from flesh and blood, not from human invention and creativeness (Mt. 16.17-18). It always has been, since its completion, and will be, the only epitome of God's Word to mankind that one must continually return to in order to be confronted with the Word's own formulation of His Mystery.

This conclusion has always been recognized by teachers in the Church

who had any validity, by Justin, Irenaeus, Origen, by the Syrians and the Cappadocians, by the Westerners, especially Augustine and Aquinas, and all the Scholastics who had to become Masters of the Sacred Page before they were worth their salt as theologians. Aquinas in his attempt to bring together a concise and clear formulation of all sacred doctrine in his *Summa* takes this conclusion so much for granted that sacred doctrine and sacred scripture are for him synonymous terms, and arguing in theology from any other source than the Bible is always improper argumentation no matter how fruitful it may be (SmTh 1.1.8, ad 2). When one further considers that St. Thomas was not even primarily a "summist," but an expositor of the Bible, as were all medieval theologians, one can see how anomalous is the present academic legislation in the Church that demands a degree in theology as a prerequisite for a degree in Sacred Scripture. In the Middle Ages the process of becoming an expert in the knowledge of God was exactly the reverse. One had to have a firm grasp of the canonical writings as the basis of any further advance in sacred knowledge. How and why the process has been reversed is an unimportant problem compared to the need for modern Catholic theologians to realize their Biblical illiteracy and to do something about it. They must overcome their unprecedented theological inadequacy.

Modern linguistic and historical advances have emphasized the unique place that the Bible has in transmitting the absolute basis of any talking about God, the divine communication of God's sacred plan for the universe as unveiled by His spokesmen, especially by His ultimate mouthpiece, the Word of God, Jesus. In the last two centuries more fruitful energy has been expended on the exposition of all the books of the Bible, on the reconstruction of the history in which God intervened, and on the overall meaning of God's revelation of Himself as recorded in His book than at any one period in Christian history. The result has been a massive amount of reflection upon the font of theology, which is still being sifted and analyzed by professional biblicists. There have been inaccuracies and rashness in this movement, leading to a rejection by many scholars of the divine origin and authority of the Bible, but the most important and positive result has been an even deeper understanding of God's own formulation of His message. This understanding now demands elaboration and analysis. Happily, many have seen this need and have attempted to organize the vast material and come to a consensus as to the relevancy of the newly gleaned knowledge for present theological formulations. Covenant theology, with its emphasis on election and commitment between the benign divine cove-

nanter and His holy people, the progressive evolution of the history of salvation with all its disparate elements being funnelled into the Israelite end-time expectations, and the fulfillment of all divine challenge and human response in the Gospel are some of the important themes now being thoroughly examined and synthesized. Much work remains to be done, but, hopefully, the laborers are becoming more numerous especially in the Catholic Church where more and more emphasis is being put upon Biblical research. The theologian cannot possibly remain aloof from this emergence of an old yet so new and fruitful method of restating the Christian mystery according to the divine formulation itself.

In this effort professional biblicists play quite justly, the role of the medieval Masters of the Sacred Page, although many have tended to limit their contributions to linguistic and historico-critical refinements and have not dared or cared to enter the sacrosanct field of the theologian. In contrast, the already trained theologian, and those taught by him, feel out of the battle, since they are ignorant of Hebrew and Greek and perhaps of other important tools such as German and French. Thus, the linguist remains theologically neutral, and the theologian, biblically bashful. What should be a wonderful opportunity to bring together in a dialogue the experts in both fields may become the occasion of an awkward awareness of not being able to communicate with each other.

What is needed is for the theologian to overcome his illiteracy by examining the Bible again in the light of the biblicist's guidance and direction. He must admit that he is somewhat of a caricature of a theologian unless his theological speculation is rooted in an intelligent and contemporaneous grasp of Biblical themes rather than in the poorly understood and eviscerated proof texts of the *catenae* and the manuals. Above all he must realize that no one can validly talk about God unless he has some contact with those who talked with Him and for Him.

This is not to say that the biblicist is such a mentor, but he certainly has more immediate contact with God's spokesmen and the teaching Word. If he remains a linguist and an historian, the contact will be interesting and in a certain sense essential for theological development, but basically he will remain just another technician spawned by the modern age, and will never fulfill his role as the Master of the Sacred Page. He must therefore overcome his tendency to rest on his linguistic laurels and come to a confrontation with the prophets whose words he pulls apart. Most of all he must get behind the words and the prophets of the Word itself, God's Word whose fruitfulness is never frustrated (Is. 55.10-11). In performing

this task he will become a true theologian and a channel for a new exposition of God's summation of His truth.

As the theologian becomes more biblical and the biblicist more theological, the dialogue that is necessary for the fullest analysis and synthesis of Biblical treasures will become more facile and fruitful, and perhaps once again the biblicist will be considered a theologian and the theologian an expert in the Word of God. Theology itself will then no longer be divided into opposed and antagonistic functions but will become again what it was for St. Paul and St. John, a delving into the depths of the mystery of Christ, the mystery hidden in the step by step revelation of God's plan for the divinisation of mankind and made blindingly clear in Jesus' new life through death.

The prophets have spoken through the Word and the Word Himself has spoken in the flesh by His signs, His words, and His giving of His life for men so that they may know God more fully and may have thereby eternal life. God's message through His Spokesman is perennially vital and challenging; each new age and every person must respond to this challenge by building on the responses of previous ages and other human endeavors to formulate an understanding of the inexhaustible mystery. But it is also the responsibility of each age to re-examine and formulate its own understanding of the incomprehensible mystery so that the mystery may be made relevant to itself. If it fails to do so, it becomes fossilized in the ancient formulations once so vital and powerful for another age but now inadequate to express much more than an example of one period's delving into the mystery. Every response terminates in the mystery but no one response or all of them together express it so adequately that one may say that now it is fully known. If it were fully known, it would no longer be the perennial mystery and challenge demanding the response of belief in the unknown and unseen. We have today in the revival of Biblical awareness a means for a reformulation of the mystery that in its turn will never comprehend it but will certainly surround it again with the mystery's vital urgency. No staff, no scrip, no extra clothing, and no delay whatsoever are permitted for those who react to this challenge; the urgency brooks no impediment. We must run again as fast as we can to the empty tomb; we must look again and see that He is not there; we must turn away again from looking for the Living amongst the dead; and we must believe again in what the Scriptures said of Him: He has to rise from the dead (Jn 20.3-9).

*John bore witness concerning him,
and cried, "This was he of whom I said
'He who is to come after me has
been set above me, because he
was before me.'"*

*And of his fulness we have all
received, grace for grace.*

*For the Law was given through
Moses;*

*grace and truth came through
Jesus Christ.*

No one at any time has seen God.

*The only-begotten Son, who is
in the bosom of the Father,*

he has revealed him.—John 1:15-18

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