

Teaching Theology in the Local Church

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SOMEONE has observed that the theologian is like the old maid in that he knows all the answers but nobody ever asks him the questions. It comes as something of a jolt to many a seminary graduate when he discovers that most of the persons in his church, and out of it, do not seem to be particularly interested in many of the issues that had seemed so important in discussions in theological classrooms. He is appalled at the mixture of superstition, tradition, and indifference that characterizes the religious philosophy of the average layman. He may be tempted to toss powerful verbal explosions into the midst of this complacency, but if he wants to do any lasting good, or to live in one place more than a year, there are perhaps better methods of approach.

In considering the general principles of teaching theology in the local church, certain basic principles might be laid down. Perhaps their very obviousness may be an indication of their importance.

1. The primary function of the religious technician is to give religious values to persons; promoting a theology is secondary. The first duty of any theologian, especially one who assigns to religion a rather particular and definite function, is to further what he believes to be the primary function of religion. If ordinary persons find that the non-manipulables become less fearful and life takes on a more hopeful quality because of the ministry of the minister-theologian, then he has achieved his foremost task, whether he converts anyone to his way of thinking or not.

However, one will probably not be able to minister to the religious needs

of everybody indiscriminately. There are probably at least some individuals in almost every community who are not receiving religious assistance from any church because of intellectually indefensible theologies held by all of the churches in that community. The intelligent theologian may be able to reach these persons with a message of vital religion. But he must not forget that they are not the only persons with religious needs. The minister has certain moral obligations to those in his church. One of the advantages of Methodism is that it allows for differences of opinion and ways of thinking among its adherents. Any religious technician, regardless of his theological position, needs to beware of driving away all but those who are in agreement with him. Particularly is this true when he is a member of a larger church which is tolerant to sincere differences of opinion.

This does not mean that the theologian needs to be insincere. He need not act contrary to his own convictions, and must not violate his own integrity. There is plenty of common ground where persons of differing religious beliefs can meet for fellowship and for worship. If he offers a constructive and effective program from which religious values come to the participants, then later he will probably have opportunity, if he wishes it, to teach some individuals more of his basic philosophy.

2. Most of the efforts to teach theology will be indirect. Since teaching a theology is usually a secondary aim of the religious technician, the attempts to achieve it will of necessity be indirect. It is scarcely necessary for a minister to label himself publicly by the name of some school of theological thought. The significance of any theology lies in the

religious values rather than in the name. Most people would not know what the minister meant if he spoke of his own particular school of theological thought by name. But he can preach its principle without labeling it; he can minister to people in terms of it without naming it; he can center the whole church program around the ideas involved in it, and still not name it. If, after individuals have become acquainted with some of the ideas and practices, they wish a name for the position, it is quite fitting to give it one.

Probably the worse possible approach any theologian could make would be to announce that he is bringing a new school of theological thought to which he wishes to convert all of his congregation and any others he can reach. That may be a commendable goal, provided it is not his only aim, or his primary aim, but it must be stated and achieved indirectly.

3. The whole subject of religious techniques needs much consideration. The importance of the service of worship in its contribution to the religious needs of the persons who participate in it can scarcely be overemphasized by the sincere theologian. The elements of the service need not be new and essentially different, but they need to be reinterpreted to give them new meaning, both for the minister and for the layman. Whatever the order, it can be conducted with dignity and logic, characterized by unity and smooth progress, and filled with religious significance throughout. There is a widespread need throughout Methodism for training of both ministers and laymen in the significance and practice of worship. Theologians, particularly those who recognize a specific function of religion, should be able to take the lead in this field. If seminary graduates could go out and consistently conduct worship services fraught with real religious values, people would soon be saying, "Those men have something," and their

theology, having passed the pragmatic test, would have built for itself a firm foundation.

4. In teaching theology one must teach skills, emotional responses, and attitudes as well as knowledge and logic. Probably the great majority of laymen will be willing to accept the values without delving into the theory behind them. William H. Bernhardt has pointed out in his classes that just as the physician does not find it necessary to explain the technical aspects of the disease or of its treatment to every patient under his care, so the religious technician is not obliged to explain the philosophical details to all of those whom he is "treating."

Religion has never been a purely intellectual approach to any problem. If there are any individuals who meet their non-manipulable problems on a purely rational basis, they are far removed from the rank and file of human beings; the number of them who will seek religious values in an institution designed primarily to give such values will be negligible.

Armour Evans once used this figure. In every well-equipped kitchen there are both an ice box and a stove. So in every religious experience there are both intellectual and emotional aspects. The cold reasoning of the intellect and the warm feeling of emotion are both essential.

The theologian will do well to bear in mind that learning is not confined to intellectual processes. Ira A. Morton points this out in an adult study course, "Making the Most of Church Membership." Persons learn skills, attitudes, and emotional responses as well as facts. There are skills and emotional responses to be learned in worship and other religious techniques that the theologian must be prepared to teach. If he can teach his people to be better worshipers he is preparing them to accept the logic of his position.

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5. **"Accentuate the positive."** Seminary graduates, particularly those who came from a conservative background, may recall that the first terms of their seminary work contained much that was negative, that much time was devoted to breaking down certain old ideas to make place for new ones. This is perhaps not as necessary as it was twenty, or even ten, years ago, but the fact remains that the rank and file of Methodist laymen are still quite conservative, and the seminary-trained minister may be tempted to use the same approach.

There is good argument for using the negative approach in the theological seminary; but it will not work in the local church, where the situation is entirely different. The theologian must put emphasis on the positive values in his system of thinking and trust that the new growth of religious values and ideas will choke out the old less effective ones. As the minister leads his people to trust and confidence in God and as that trust and confidence enable them to meet the non-manipulables more hopefully, ideas will gradually grow up on the basis of positive experience. There will constantly be opportunities to point out the values of religion and its concepts of God, Jesus Christ, sin and salvation, and the like. Few persons will object to these positive statements and the more thoughtful will soon be asking the questions that will clarify the theology. These positive elements may be emphasized in sermons, in forums, in Sunday school classes, in midweek meetings, as well as in personal conversations.

One channel not as much used as it might be is the widely-circulated popular religious periodicals. Many theologians think that they should aim to write for the professional journals. This is all to the good, but the curricular materials, the "Christian Advocate," and various other materials put out by the boards of Methodism are read by

thousands where the professional journals are read by hundreds. There is room for positive theological emphasis in these papers.

6. **The personality of the religious technician will count more than the logic of his theology.** All this requires almost infinite tact. There is probably no profession where the personality of the technician influences the effectiveness of his work more than in the ministry. One antagonistic argument, one flare of temper at the wrong moment, one breach of accepted community ethics, may break down a whole system of theological arguments as well as injure the professional career of the minister.

It is not within the scope of this paper to set down any set of psychological principles for getting along with laymen in the local church. But every experienced minister knows that if his laymen have confidence in his integrity and his sincerity they will be much more ready to accept his judgment as authoritative in theological matters.

Kindly understanding and a feeling of personal fellowship will do more than logical argument to win men and women to a type of theology. If this principle seems unjust, it can be set down as one of the various non-manipulables that the minister has to meet.

5. **Teaching theology is a slow and gradual process.** Given the tact and the winsome personality, the religious technician who will teach theology must further be endowed with almost limitless patience. Like any teacher he must wait years to observe his best results. The theologian himself did not master his system of theology in a few weeks; he can hardly be expected to teach it to someone else in a month or even a year.

Neither is there any guarantee of success. There are many individuals who will never accept or understand any system of theology. There will be individuals and groups where the wise minister will probably not attempt to promote his theology. The older adults,

particularly those who are more conservative and represent the traditional ways of thinking, make up one of these groups. The theologian needs to be very careful how he destroys religious values, even though they may be based on a philosophy quite different from his own. Most older adults will not rethink their basic philosophies. There will be some younger persons, too, who will not be willing or able to think their way through to grasp the significance of a consistent system of theology, for one reason or another.

But because it is a slow and often uncertain process does not make it a less constant one. The theologian will need to be alert to every positive opportunity to teach men and women how to achieve religious values.

6. The job of the theologian may be the hardest job in the world, but it is the most important. Teaching a theology in the local church is a tremendous job. The difficulties are many and various. In the first place, the minister who attempts such a task is faced with the problem of teaching a group of persons who bring all kinds of preconceived ideas with them. There will be about as many mixtures of theological ideas as there are individuals in his congregation. And almost that many degrees of teachableness. Add to that a widespread indifference and the theologian may find that his "hopeful adjustment" will need to work overtime many times.

Even rather well educated persons may hold quite naive ideas about religion. One physics professor remarked, "I don't think about religion in the same way I do about other fields. If I did I wouldn't have any." Too many persons are afraid to put their ideas of God to the test of intelligent scrutiny for fear they will lose them. The theologian should be able to instill trust and confidence in those who are afraid to ask the questions.

It is always difficult to make people think. It is much easier to drift along in the same old hodge-podge way of worshiping and meeting one's problems. But when a persons sees the better way and what the implications are he must do something about it if he is to be true to himself. It is not easy for the theologian to make persons see the better way and exert themselves to take it, all this without creating antagonism, fear, or despair. But that is his job.

It may be the most difficult job in the world, but it is the most important. If the task is difficult, then every success is an achievement and achievement is its own reward. The theologian believes that he has the only really intellectual satisfactory method of religious interpretation of his existential medium. He cannot but share it with others.

And if the world was ever in need of a religious faith it is today. Man faces today new and greater non-manipulables than he ever dreamed of before. It behooves him to make adjustment to them. The theologian can and must help him, not on a basis of false optimism or of mistaken values, but through a trust and confidence in God.

If Christianity is to survive today it must be a Christianity interpreted in terms of the world in which persons live today. Rightly or not, this is a scientific age, and concepts and ideas which cannot be subjected to scientific scrutiny will eventually be scrapped. Any theologian to survive today must offer religious values based upon observation and reflection. He must hold out religious hope to coming decades, perhaps to coming centuries. The job of the theologian is significant and tremendous!

The persons best qualified to suggest more practical and specific techniques for helping individuals achieve religious values are those who are actually engaged in the ministry, serving local churches. Readers of *The Iliff Review* might be able to render great service to

each other as well as to the cause of theology and to the furtherance of religious values by exchanging ideas and sharing techniques they have found most successful. These suggestions could be organized editorially and appear from time to time in these columns. It might be well, too, to include some of the more knotty of the professional problems that arise in the hope that some colleague may have found a solution.

The following questions may give some suggestion of the sort of professional exchange that might be helpful. They are not exhaustive:

What worship techniques do you find most effective? What adaptations do you make to the orders provided by the church? Which orders do you find most effective?

What special meetings or classes do you have for instruction? Do you have a midweek meeting? How do you conduct them?

What assistance or instruction do you give for personal devotions? How do you give it? How widespread is the demand for such assistance? Do you

recommend special readings, exercises, and the like? Where do you get resource material?

How do you recruit and train teachers for Sunday school? Do you have inservice training for your Sunday school teachers?

Do you attempt to teach theology in the Sunday school, MYF, Young Adult Fellowship, or other regular channels of instruction? What age groups do you find most teachable? Do you make any attempt to adapt any of the regular curricular materials of the church to your particular needs? Which materials are most adaptable?

What deliberate attempts do you make to teach theology as such? What are the first approaches you make? To whom?

What part does Bible study play in promoting a theology?

If any of the readers will answer some of these questions or suggest particular techniques of their own or suggest what the more serious professional problems are, it may be possible to institute here a worthwhile exchange of professional experience and ideas.