

Pluralism's Theological Challenge

Editorial by

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The narrative in Acts of the spread of the gospel has long fascinated me. Peter's response to his noontime vision with its command, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat," was "No, Lord" (Acts 10). His subsequent experience at the home of Cornelius confounded some of his most deeply held convictions.

The experience of the Spirit's baptism on those assembled proved to be demonstration enough for Peter. Subsequently, in Jerusalem before the apostles and elders, Peter persisted with the lesson of his experience in spite of its fundamentally revolutionary character. Relating his encounter with Cornelius, he concluded rhetorically, "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" (Acts 11:17).

The early church, emerging from the womb of Judaism, had no handy catechism or systematic theology to which it could refer. The experience of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the baptism of God's Spirit fit none of its categories. These dramatic events had to be assimilated and brought into relationship with the old covenant, with Abraham and Moses and David, with the promises of Isaiah and all the prophets. The Scriptures which came to their minds had to be searched anew because the tradition simply could not accommodate their new experience.

The theologies of the New Testament are the consequence of the apostles' wrestling jointly with their experience and with Israel's faith tradition. The Christian understanding as it evolved in the early church and as it emerges in the New Testament is the result of that process of interpreting anew the historic faith.

The New Testament already reflects the process of translation going on in regard, for example, to the question of Jesus' identity. From the eschatological prophet of

the early chapters of Acts to the incarnational Christology of the Fourth Gospel there is a whole range of interpretations of who Jesus is, not mutually exclusive, but rather reflecting the unfathomable richness of this One in whom dwelt the fullness of God.

The sixteenth century, during which John Calvin wrestled with tradition and reformed theology and practice according to the Word of God, was a period of cultural crisis and upheaval. William Bouwsma writes in his study of John Calvin, "The century was tense, driven, fundamentally incoherent, and riven by insoluble conflicts that were all the more serious because they were as much within as between individuals and parties" (p. 4). Bouwsma's study presents Calvin as a person very much of his own time with the tensions of society at large to be found within his own person. And, precisely for that reason, the tradition found new translation and expression, a retrieval of the tradition's essential meaning.

Such a translation process is the ongoing task of theology, for theology is not an external norm demanding obedience but, rather, reflection on the present experience of God within the context of the cumulative tradition of faith. In *The Analogical Imagination*, David Tracy points out that when the notion of authority shifts from a truth disclosed to the mind and heart to an external norm for the obedient will, the theological task withers to an exercise of repeating shopworn conclusions of the tradition. He writes, "Eventually, the central, classical symbols and doctrines of the tradition become mere 'fundamentals' to be externally accepted and endlessly repeated." (p. 99)

Then we have not a theology as hermeneutic but rather fundamentalism. Fundamentalism does not interpret and translate the tradition in dialogue with the present horizon of human experience, but is reduced to repetition and reiteration. Such repetition and reiteration eventually hollow because they are spoken into a vacuum devoid of present, living human experience.

I am convinced that we need to rethink our own theological tradition as radically as did Peter when confronted with the experience of God's grace in the home of the Gentile Cornelius. The dramatic shifts in our cultural situation, the ferment in the world-become-a-neighborhood, the knowledge of other cultures and faiths, and the existential experience of persons in whom they are embodied, make it incumbent upon us to search again our own faith tradition to see if the experience of our contemporary world may elicit new insights to which we have up to the present been blinded. Otherwise, increasingly we will have experience for which we have no theology, and our theology will be the reiteration of an external ideology unrelated to present experience, lacking passion and compelling appeal.

As heirs of Reformation theology we are being challenged to practice what we have proudly claimed but poorly lived out—that we are a people re-formed according to the Word of God and always being re-formed. That is to live with one's faith formulations always at risk because one begins with the

acknowledgement of their only relative adequacy. But in the process one's faith experience will deepen with a new sense of freedom and a growing sense of awe before the mystery of the gracious God whose work of creation and redemption we have come to know through Jesus Christ our Lord.