

Building the bridge from academic theology to Christian mission

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Bi-polar theology

Ideally, Christian theology will always be striving in a balanced way to integrate the two poles of its ellipse, God's revelation and the world of human existence. We will be attempting to correlate, as Tillich said, the truth of the Word with the questions people are asking today.¹ We want to view everything around us in the perspective provided by the gospel. Theology is truly exciting and has a real cutting edge when it is effecting a transformation of contemporary reality. Revelation can only do people any positive good if it is understood, and to be understood it must be phrased in intelligible terms. Standing between, as we do, the world of the biblical text and the world of today, we have to build bridges across the divide for the sake of reaching today's generation for Christ.²

In all forms of classical Christianity it would go without saying that this work of translation whereby the gospel is rendered into modern speech and categories would be done in a posture of complete faithfulness to the Word of God. We would be trying to clarify the truth of the Bible without changing its meaning in the slightest way. The fourth mark of the church in the Nicene creed, apostolicity, signifies the commitment to the cognitive substance of apostolic teaching enshrined in the New Testament.³ It was always just assumed that the revelation pole of the theological ellipse yields valid truth and information about God's person and will for us to which we ought to be submissive. In this context then the main challenge would be hermeneutical: how can we convey the truth given in the biblical culture to people living in the modern situation? There would be absolutely no thought of demythologising the message to make it more acceptable. It would be a matter of clarifying normative truth to assist with understanding. Theology was conservative with respect to the Word pole, and contemporary only with respect to the modern setting and the problems of communication.

¹Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 59-66. In fairness to the reader one must point out that Tillich's own practice fell far short of his stated method of correlation. His theology lacks biblical substance.

²John R. W. Stott describes preaching in terms of bridging between two worlds. The title of his book in North America reveals that. *Between Two Worlds, The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982). In Britain the book was entitled *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982).

³On the apostolicity of the church, see Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), pp. 344-59.

The sword and the trowel

But all of this has radically changed in our day. No longer can we take the revelation pole for granted when building our bridges. Like Timothy, we live in an age when we have to guard the gospel because false teachers are out to change it (2 Tim. 1:14; 2:2; 3:9; 4:3-4). One has to guard the substance of the truth at the same time as trying to make good the communication. It reminds me of Nehemiah and his colleagues who had to hold a sword in one hand while building with the other because of the danger of attack from their enemies. Needless to say, these circumstances make it harder to get on with the building.

I have reference of course to what we call religious liberalism, which is more dedicated to transforming than to translating the Christian message. If one surveys the history of dogmatic theology, one cannot fail to notice that a major shift took place with Kant and Schleiermacher which dropped out the objective truth content of the gospel and substituted for it some form of human reason or experience.⁴ Biblical doctrine was no longer regarded as infallible or even essential to Christianity. Apostolic teaching was shoved aside as the touchstone of catholic continuity and replaced by a vague continuity of spirit or life stance. Of course doctrine was not dropped altogether, but it was seen to be the expression of man's self-understanding and not revealed truth. What was now taken to be crucial was human experience or perhaps philosophical reasoning. No longer was revelation seen to involve authoritative content; instead it was taken to be an experience which throws up different intellectual and moral patterns which are themselves human in origin and authority.⁵

The result has been a great transformation of classical theology. Think of Bultmann or Tillich or Robinson. And with the transformation of course there has also occurred a great assimilation of the church into secular modernity. It has reached the point where it is hard to distinguish what some theologians are saying from what the humanists declare.⁶

⁴Otto Weber includes a history of dogmatics in his own book *Foundations of Dogmatics I* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 73-166.

⁵On the nature of religious liberalism, see Alasdair I. C. Heron, *A Century of Protestant Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), ch. 1, and Jan Walgrave, *Unfolding Revelation, The Nature of Doctrinal Development* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), ch. 9.

⁶For a candid self-description see Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (eds.), *Christian Theology, An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982). James Hitchcock delivers a devastating critique in *What is Secular Humanism?* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1982), ch. 8.

The effect of this tragic development upon theological bridge building has been disastrous. First, it has meant that classical Christians (evangelicals as well as others) have been forced to put a lot of time and effort into defending the revelation pole. While absolutely necessary, this delayed more constructive activity. Second, because of the atrocities which have been done in the name of updating the gospel by the liberals, classical Christians have become nervous about the whole operation. It has forced us into a defensive and suspicious posture because we want no part in gospel twisting.

In defence of the faith

It would be nice if the liberals would listen to Stott's impatient question, 'Why can we not be biblical as well as contemporary?'⁷ But we must not be naive about the situation; for what we face is, in many cases at least, a determined decision not to submit to biblical teaching as an essential element in theology and a stubborn insistence to follow human wisdom instead. What we have to do therefore is to make a strong stand and argue that true Christianity is a religion wedded to biblical substance and not malleable and formless. How then can we support such a conviction?

In supporting our belief in the indispensability of biblical content in a truly Christian theology, it is not necessary to exaggerate the point. Revelation surely involves more than propositional truth. The acts of God, a way of life, and existential involvement are all important. But it is impossible to deny that doctrine is part of divine revelation according to the New Testament. It belongs to what is permanent and normative in it. One could list a large number of texts which bring this out. Christians are repeatedly told to stand firm in their faith, to maintain the gospel, to guard the truth, to pay close attention to what they were taught, and to contend for the faith once delivered (Col. 1:23; 2 Thes. 2:15; 2 Tim. 1:14; Heb. 2:1; Jude 3). To be a Christian involves obedience to the standard of apostolic teaching (Rom. 6:17). The church leader is told 'to hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also confute those who contradict it' (Tit. 1:9). In the same way the preacher according to the New Testament is a herald with a message to deliver, a sower with a Word to scatter, an ambassador with a cause to plead, a steward entrusted with God's mysteries, and a workman charged with rightly dividing the Word of truth. They have been given a message and have the responsibility to convey it. Of course they must take into account the situation of the audience, but above all else they must preach the truth of God, not their own opinions.⁸

Thus when the early theologians sought to unpack the dogmatic significance of the New Testament message in the face of new questions and challenges which arose, they were not distorting the gospel as Harnack charged but following the lines indicated in the original revelation

⁷Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, p. 144.

⁸Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology, Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), ch. 9. J. R. W. Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait* (London: Tyndale Press, 1961).

and message. It is perfectly clear that making a good and true confession of faith ranks alongside other criteria of true Christianity in the New Testament.⁹ Doctrine is the grammar and syntax of the message. It summons us back from our own speculations to the bony structures of God's truth. It points us to the essential content of the gospel which it is theology's task to state coherently. Theology really is translation – charged with rendering the God-given content of the Word into modern languages and thought patterns. People such as Bultmann and Tillich really have no basis for speaking of their work in these terms as they do since they have no intention of rendering biblical content.¹⁰

Building bridges

But the other side of the coin is crucially important too. It is essential that we relate God's infallible Word to the ever-changing human situation. We seek relevance as well as truth in evangelical theology. Just as the Lord spoke to us in the modalities of human speech and in his incarnation took our flesh upon himself, so we are summoned to communicate the Word of God in a manner which is intelligible and challenging to our hearers. What God has given in the gospel can always be freshly understood and applied. His Word can never be exhausted and proves able to be related effectively to every new circumstance. The commandment may be old, as John said, but ever new (1 Jn. 2:7-8). Let me offer a few suggestions to help us all ground the Word in the world.

First, we must needs be prayerful and conscious of our dependence upon the Spirit of God. Liberal theology and preaching has been far too much the product of merely human comment upon God's Word. It has been a human performance, not an event of the Word breaking out, the articulation of pious feelings and humanitarian thoughts. If theology and preaching are to be the Word for today, as Barth was so concerned to say, then it will have to be done in a spirit of humbly waiting upon God. This was the concern which led Barth to emphasize (no doubt, overemphasize) the freedom of the Word of God and its power to prove its authority again and again in the present day. Evangelicals might say, what is crucial is the exposition of the Bible under the unction of the Spirit. The Spirit will see to it that the Word gets grounded in the world. The factors which will guarantee this are not in our hands or under our control. We depend upon the promise of God to honour his Word and preserve his people.¹¹

⁹See Gerald L. Bray, 'The Patristic Dogma' in P. Toon and J. D. Spiceland (eds.), *One God in Trinity* (Westchester, Illinois: Cornerstone Books, 1980), pp. 42-61.

¹⁰David H. Kelsey points this out in *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 185-92.

¹¹See Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism, The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983). Despite the title, this book is a presentation of Barth's theology as a paradigm for evangelical theology today. Ch. 4 deals with preaching according to Barth.

Paul referred to this when he prayed for 'a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him' (Eph. 1:17). God has given us the Spirit precisely to lead and guide us as the mind and will of the Lord. As we yield our lives to God, we can expect to experience illumination in the things of God and direction in discipleship flowing out of a vital relationship with him. We can expect to receive guidance as to the significance of biblical texts for our situation and time. This is an aspect of what was meant by the promise that the Spirit would lead us into all truth (Jn. 16:13). Let no-one scoff and say this is just wisdom by intuition and guesswork. This is God's promise, and all of his promises prove true.¹²

Second, we have to be clear about why we want to build the bridges. Is it in order to float an idea no-one else thought of? Is it to make the gospel easier to accept than it actually is? Is it to establish how clever we are? Theology in the New Testament was missionary theology. Its rationale and driving force was the reaching of the nations for Jesus the Christ. Paul wanted to convert Greeks and Romans to the Jewish Messiah, and had to think how to communicate an originally Jewish gospel to them. He was not trying to write a definitive systematic theology for all time. He longed to see the nations saved and baptised. Theology was channelled down the track of the great commission. Is that true of our theology?¹³

We can also learn from Paul how to go about the task of building bridges. He was a very flexible communicator who actually claimed to 'be all things to all men' (1 Cor. 9:22). Evidently he was prepared to go a very long way to identify with the concerns of his hearers in order to get through to them. Short of perverting the gospel, Paul was willing to cross over cultural barriers and express himself in terms people could understand. For the sake of Christ he was prepared to undertake even this difficult and often painful transition. This is surely the kind of flexibility and elasticity of approach which ought to characterize all of us if we are serious about effective contextualizing.¹⁴

Third, there is a place for human wisdom. Paul told Timothy to think over what he said to him (2 Tim. 2:7) and this is indeed what we must do in relation to the Bible and in relation to our modern audience.

In relation to the Bible we must take care to understand the message which God has given us in the text. It is the norm and not the contemporary human consensus, whatever that may be. But in order to recover its teaching, whether theological or ethical or practical, we will

¹²Richard C. Lovelace discusses theological integration in the context of spiritual renewal. *Dynamics of Spiritual Life, An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), pp. 172-84.

¹³The great passion of Donald McGavran's life has been to remind the church that its task is to call people out of darkness into light. This is the task of theology also. See most recently Donald A. McGavran and Arthur F. Glasser, *Contemporary Theologies of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983).

¹⁴On this characteristic in Paul, see Richard N. Longenecker, *Paul Apostle of Liberty* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), ch. 10.

have to try to distinguish what is permanent and applicable to us in it, as over against what is merely traditional opinion or what is of mainly local significance. This will involve a never-ending struggle to understand the text and the message it bears. What aspects in the texts about creation, for example are meant to be binding on us and which are only part of the Hebrew way of expressing the truth? How are we to understand Jesus' message in relation to what the Zealots or the Pharisees were saying? What did Paul mean by his difficult remarks about the place of God's law in the Christian life? If our hermeneutical bridges are to be sound, they must be grounded in an accurate interpretation of the Word of God.¹⁵

In relation to the modern audience we have to search for points of contact within their cultural setting. We need the wisdom of which Proverbs so often speaks to locate the cultural issues and forms in which the biblical message can have the same impact it had originally. That means we will have to be informed about the cultural situation, both our own and that of our audience, if we hope to deliver a message which registers and strikes home. When we do that we will always find that the situation throws up questions to which the gospel provides good answers. But for this to happen it is necessary that we become familiar with the frame of reference of the intended hearers. As a result we will become able to translate the message in a dynamically equivalent way.¹⁶ As we penetrate deeper into the Bible and deeper into the cultural setting we are aiming at, effective communication can be the result. Without in any way violating the substance of Scripture, we will find it possible to preach the gospel with relevance and power.

The modern theological discussion is full of examples of what can be done. Some of it is unreliable because the scriptural foundations have been cast aside and people are floundering about. Christianity is being equated with Marxism, process philosophy, and self-fulfilment ideology in ways that biblical Christians can only protest against. But some of the work is by no means unbiblical and foolish. It is profound and proper to ask as Rahner does how the good news is the true fulfilment of man's life. It is right to ask what God requires of us in a nuclear age. It is stirring to point to the biblical theme of hope in a world which longs to know whether there is any purpose in history as Moltmann does. It is appropriate to bring biblical values to bear upon the slaughter of innocents we call abortion on demand. We must declare what the Bible says about mammon and violence and power. The Bible speaks to all the things people today are so exercised about so that when we address them we are not turning away from the Bible but rather implementing it. Of course it would not be right to dogmatise about our own personal opinions. But it is right to

¹⁵Millard J. Erickson is completing a major systematic theology in three large volumes, and discusses what is involved in theological translation in *Christian Theology I* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), pp. 105-26.

¹⁶For the principle of dynamic equivalent translation, see Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture, A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), chs. 13-15.

share what the Bible says and to equip the Christian mind so that it can think responsibly and biblically about these vital matters.¹⁷ The result will almost certainly be the re-invigoration of our teaching and preaching. The Bible will be seen to count for something important and gain a new hearing.

¹⁷I would refer the reader to John Stott's helpful treatment of the way in which we ought to make the connection between the Bible and current issues. *Between Two Worlds*, pp. 151-78.

In conclusion

A bridge has two ends, and needs to be securely grounded in both. As evangelicals, along with classical Christians of every kind historically, we want to be found faithful to the Word of God and creative in our handling of it in the modern world. May God give us a great company of those who will bridge the chasm between the Bible and the modern situation by being both true to the Scriptures and relevant in their contemporary circumstances.