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 good positive 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 teaching 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 the 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.


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. 1:14-21; 2:2; 3:1-4; 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 which투 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


The effect of this tragic development upon theological 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 faith apart from the gospel by liberal authorship. This, in turn, has delayed constructive activity. Second, because of the atrocities which have been done in the name of 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 impassioned question, "Why can we not be biblical as well as contemporary?" 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 say 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, as a way of life, are all important. But it is impossible to deny that doctrine is part of divine revelation according to the New Testament and that belief in it is a normative norm in the one. One could list a large number of texts which bring this out. Christians are repeatedly told to stand firm in the truth so that they may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also confuse 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, an ambassador with a cause to plead, a steward entrusted with God's mysteries, and a workman with charge to rightly divide the Word of truth. These are all given a message and have the responsibility to convey it. Of course one must take into account the situation of the audience, but above all else they must preach the truth of God, not their own opinions.

Thus when the early theologians sought to unpack the dogmatic significance of the New Testament message in the face of the new intellectual climate they were not distorting the gospel as Harnack charged but following the lines indicated in the original revelation.

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 us as the mind and will of the Lord. As we yield our lives and hands to this ministry of 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 the truth (John 16:13). Paul says that this is just wisdom by intuition and guesswork. This is God's promise, and all of his promises prove true.

Second, we have to be clear about why we want to build the bridge. 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? It is 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?

We can also learn from Paul how to go about the task of building bridges. He was not simply interested in those 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 himself in his audience in order to get through to them. Short of converting the gentile, Paul was willing to cross over cultural barriers and express himself in terms people could understand. For the sake of God's great mission, individuals can and must often be a patient and often painful transition. This is surely the kind of flexibility and elasticity of approach which ought to characterise us if we are serious about effective contextualization.

Third, there is a place for human wisdom. Paul told Timothy to think over what he said to him (2 Tim. 2:7) and to use every wholesome teaching. Wisdom is applicable to all situations and can only profit individuals and groups who work against. But some of the work is by no means unscientific and foolish. It is profound and proper to ask how Rahner's thought on the idea of the fullness of man's life is. 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 knows little about tomorrow. It is in no way novel that Mollmann does. It is appropriate to bring biblical values to bear upon the slaughter of innocent people. It is also important to ask what the Bible says about mammon and violence and power. The Bible speaks to all the things people today are so exercised about 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


5Harold H. Kelsay points out this in The Use of Scripture in Recent English Thought (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937), pp. 185-92.


7See Thomas, op. cit., for a presentation on this subject. With this as a paradigm for evangelical theology today. Ch. 4 deals with preaching according to Barth.

8See Richard C. Lovelace discusses theological integration in the article "Integration and Ecumenism". A Study in Systematic Theology. An Evangelical Theology of Renewal (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter- Varsity, 1979), pp. 172-84

9The great passion of Donald McGavin's life has been to remind the church that its task is to call people out of darkness into the light of the gospel. Donald A. McGavin and Arthur F. Glasier, Contemplative Theology (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), pp. 102-5.

10This characteristic in Paul, see Richard N. Longenecker, Paulist Apocalypse of Liberty (New York:: Harper and Row, 1964), ch. 10.

11Wills also 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 make it intelligible. If that is the case, then it is clear that the Scriptures must be translated into any language necessary for the understanding and communication, for example are meant to be binding on us and which are only part of the Hebrew way of expressing the truth. In this way, the question of the relevance to relation to what the Zealots or the Pharisees were saying? What did Paul mean by his difficult remarks about all the "law"? Finally, if the Hebrew rhetorical and figurative bridges to be sound, they must be grounded in an accurate interpretation of the Word of God.

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 not only to cross cultural boundaries but to enter our 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 legitimate questions into a dynamically equivalent way. As we penetrate deeper into the Bible and deeper into the cultural setting we are aiming at, effective communication is possible. In any case 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 unbelievable because the scriptures are used in ways that are obviously groundless and are floundering about. Christianity is being equated with Marxism, process philosophy, and self-fulfillment ideology. These are the ways that New Testament Christians can only protest and not against. But some of the work is by no means unscientific and foolish. It is profound and proper to ask how Rahner does holiness of man's life is. 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 knows little about tomorrow. It is in no way novel that Mollmann does. It is appropriate to bring biblical values to bear upon the slaughter of innocent people. It is also important to ask what the Bible says about mammon and violence and power. The Bible speaks to all the things people today are so exercised about 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
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In defense of the faith
It would be nice if the liberals would listen to Stott’s pertinent question, “Why can we not be biblical as well as contemporary?” But we must not be naïve 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 to insist 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, his way of life, are all important. But it is impossible to deny that doctrine is part of divine revelation according to the New Testament. The belief that there is a thing called normative in one can list a large number of texts which bring this out. Christians are repeatedly told to stand firm in their faith, “be strong in the faith” (Rom. 16:7). They are told to pay close attention to what they are taught, and to contend for the faith once delivered (Col. 1:23; 2 Tim. 4:1-2). Thus the Christian believes in something. A Christian involvement means the same as the standard of apostolic teaching (Rom. 6:17). The church leader is told to hold firm to the teaching which was delivered to him, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and 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 sowing, 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. For the word is given a message and have the responsibility to convey it. Of course we must take into account the situation of the auditors, but above all else they must preach the truth of God, not their own opinions. 4

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

The building bridges
But the other side of the coin is crucially important too. It is essential that we relate God’s in-fallible 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 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 circumstantiality. As old as John said, but even new (1 Jn. 2:7-8). Let me offer a few suggestions to help us all ground the Word in the world.

First, we need make our hearers 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 in the life of the congregation. Preachers often speak of 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 in the church’s power to produce effectual results in relation present in the present day. Evangelicals might say, what is crucial is the exposition of the Bible under the unction of the Spirit. The Spirit’s work is 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.

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 this leading, then we are not just reading 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. In a real sense, for the truth is just wisdom by intuition and guesswork. This is God’s promise, and all of his promises prove true.

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We can also learn from Paul how to go about the task of building bridges. There are several examples 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 his message with the interests of a certain audience in order to get through to them. Short of perversion, the great apostle was willing to cross over cultural barriers and express himself in terms people could understand. For the sake of Gog, he was able to set aside certain standards and often painful transition. This is surely the kind of flexibility and elasticity of approach which ought to characterize us if we are serious about effective contextualizing.

Third, there is a place for human wisdom. Paul told Timothy to think over what he said to him (2 Tim. 2:7). He could not quote all the texts all the time, but he must vary the selection of his expositions. People do not understand religious language, no matter how 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 scriptures are not always findings and conclusions from the Bible are not always valid conclusions from the Bible. Others are floundering about. Christianity is being equated with Marxism, process philosophy, and self-fulfillment ideologism. Too often Christians can only protest against this, but some of the attempt is by no means unchristian and foolish. It is profound and proper to ask what Rahner means when he talks of the fullness 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 where one knows whether there is any hope in course in history as Moltmann does. It is appropriate to bring biblical values to bear upon the sculpture of modern men’s lives. It is right to ask what the Bible says about mammon and violence and power. The Bible speaks to all the people today are so exercised about so that we are not turning away from the Bible but rather implementating it. Of course we would not be so dogmatic about our own personal opinions. But it is right

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13Millard J. Erickson is completing a major systematic theological work which will give a comprehensive treatment of theological translation in Christian Theology (1 Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1983).
Only the suffering God can help: divine passibility in modern theology

Richard Bauckham

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In 1917 H. M. Repton made a judgment which has turned out to be remarkably far-sighted: 'There are many indi- viduals of English theological intellect, who are doing to play a very prominent part in the theology of the age in which we live.' The idea that God cannot suffer, accepted virtually as dogma in Christian theology from the early Greek Fathers until the nineteenth century, has in this century been progressively abandoned. For once, English theology can claim to have pioneered a major theological development: from about 1890 onwards, a steady stream of English theolo- gians, whose theological approaches differ consider- ably in other respects, have agreed in advocating with more or less emphasis, a doctrine of divine suffering. A peak of interest in the subject is indicated by J. K. V. Moltmann's important study, The Impassibility of God (1926), which was commissioned by the Archbishop's Doctrine Commission in 1924 and which itself tells the story of the historical emergence of the teaching of God's suffering up to 1924. Since then, a large number of English theologians have continued the tradition.

During this current generation, however, the idea of divine suffering has appeared in many other theological traditions, with very little influence from England. The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno developed a doctrine that the infinite sorrow of God. The Russian theologian Nicolas Berdyaev vigorously rejected im- passibility in favour of a doctrine of 'tragedy' within the divine life. The Japanese Lutheran theologian in the suffering of God up to 1924. Since then, a large number of English theologians have continued the tradition.

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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 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 doctrine of divine passibility and the modern situation by being both bold in the Scriptures and relevant in their contemporary circumstances.

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