THE THEOLOGICAL STIMULATION OF THE CHURCH AT LARGE*

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In considering the subject, "The Theological Stimulation of the Church at Large," which the General Synod placed on our agenda, we might begin by asking what Synod had in mind. The suggestion for a convocation of the two seminary faculties was made by the retiring president of Synod, Dr. Howard G. Hageman. The agenda for our convocation, however, was drawn up by Synod's Standing Committee on Professorate and Theological Seminaries. This agenda was approved by Synod and thus transmitted to us. What the Committee or Synod had in mind is not clear from the minutes of General Synod. We are left in the dark as to what prompted the suggestion that this question be discussed.

That there is a felt need in our church for serious theological discussion, I doubt. I do not discern a hunger for a change in theological diet. The need for theological stimulation is something that is to be cultivated like every taste, whether it be in the field of art and philosophy or in that of theology. The unexpressed reason of the committee may well have been the recognition that what the Reformed Church of America needs is theological stimulation and that the taste for this needs to be cultivated as something basic and vital in the life and well-being of the church. Whether or not I am right in so interpreting the mind of the committee, we certainly would agree that theological activity in our church is something we need to cultivate for her own good. Whatever constructive suggestions we can make cooperatively will be a service to our Lord and his church.

I

To begin with, let me make a few comments upon three terms in the subject we are to discuss. By the "church at large" is meant, I take it, not any segment like the ministry or the officers of congregations, but the whole membership of the church—all members, both baptized and in full communion. All of them are to be stimulated theologically as part of their

*In substance, this article was given and discussed at the convocation of the two seminary faculties' meeting at Buck Hill Falls prior to the meeting of the General Synod, June, 1961.
“equipment,” which is necessary “for the work of ministry,” which in turn consists in “building up the body of Christ.” But the Church as the body of Christ is not yet what she should be. She has not yet attained “to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God,” nor to “mature manhood,” nor to “the stature of the fulness of Christ.”

All members of the Church are in a state of a minor (they are called nepioi) “tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine.” But since in Christ they are now “in the truth,” in the authentic existence of faith, they are “to grow up in love,” unto “the fulness of Christ,” who is “the head.” The “work of ministry” is one for every member of the Church. By contrast, those who are called to special responsibility are to use their God-given gifts to the end that the Church might fulfill her calling, her own peculiar “work of ministry.” To fulfill that ministry means also growing up theologically.

Secondly, what is meant by stimulation? Webster gives us as one of its meanings this definition. To stimulate means “to arouse or affect by an intoxicating, especially an alcoholic, beverage.” This, I am sure, is not the meaning of the word in our subject. Webster’s connotation of the word, however, has an implication we do well to keep in mind. There should be something intoxicating and ecstatic in theological activity. It should be a delightful spontaneity that removes every feeling of being oppressed by an alien task. Theological activity should be an exuberant, uninhibited, free expression of life lived in the new dimension of faith in Jesus Christ as God’s self-revelation.

This goal will not be achieved (such is the presupposition of the topic under discussion) unless members of the Church are excited to such activity by some goad, or some pungent motive, or some persuasion. It is part of our assignment to discover and suggest legitimate means that might be used to achieve the desired end. This end will not be achieved automatically, but only as the Church is stimulated, excited, challenged by the power of the Spirit, “the Lord and Giver of Life.”

In the third place, what is meant by “theological?” The phrase “theological stimulation” implies that there are other activities in the life of the Church. For the moment, however, these are not in the focus of attention, not because they are essentially unimportant but because of the selective and prior importance of this one, singled out for consideration. It is singled out because, although basic in the life of the Church, it is overshadowed by other emphases and aspects.

We should not assume that the committee which placed the topic on our agenda implied that the Church has no theology. For them as

1For the meaning of the exposition in this paragraph see Ephesians 4:1-17.
2See part III for possible means.
for us the Church already has a theology. Our *Standards of Unity* are a theological articulation and expression of Reformed Faith at its best. By suggesting that the Church be stimulated theologically, the committee did not imply that this heritage must be consigned to the limbo of forgotten things. Rather, it is implied that this is the base from which the Church operates. She cannot be stimulated theologically apart from this. Theological stimulation never can begin *de novo* in the Church with a past. And this past antedates not only us but even the Reformation, which itself was a theological stimulation of a past half-forgotten.

Theological stimulation then means, first, a renewed effort at appropriation, not as something past and no longer true but as a vital part of a living present. Unless this past is understood and appropriated, how could the Church advance theologically? Theological stimulation means, to begin with, discovering how this past might be more effectively transmitted to the present. That there is a great illiteracy respecting it and in certain places disapprobation and discrediting as something *passe* cannot be gainsaid. Calvin called his *magnum opus* an *institutio*, an instruction. For him, the Church is the mother of all believers, who "conceives, bears, nourishes and instructs her children, who indeed, may never leave her school." The Church is a school having its own language and its own curriculum that must be learned before we can speak of curriculum and language revision. Theological stimulation should consist first of all of a renewed and intensified effort to transmit an inherited past to become a meaningful present. Theologically our situation is not completely fluid. It roots in the past.

Secondly, it means that existing thought-forms and patterns, all our thought and language about God in Jesus Christ, this whole precious heritage, should be constantly and honestly submitted to the free and untrammeled searchlight of Scripture. It means that we are to live by our confessional faith of the sole authority of Scripture. *Sola scriptura* means that all our thought-forms and the language in which we express them, however good in themselves, should be tested by the criterion of biblical revelation.

This too is part of our heritage that needs recapturing. The Roman Catholic Church in the system of Thomas Aquinas had frozen the relation of thought to revelation. Theology was conceived to be a systematic and orderly arrangement, repetition, and transmission of revealed truth, which must not be questioned. Thomas Aquinas expressed it once for all in final, definitive form, the Roman Catholic Church authenticated it, and every one was to accept it as the faith under threat of excommunication. Here theology is restricted to the transmission of a sacred deposit.

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*Institutes IV, I, 4.*
legitimized by the Roman hierarchy and taught as unerring truth to each succeeding generation.

Against this Calvin and the Reformers reacted as a subversion of the proper relationship of revelation to theology. For them, the Church was gathered, defended, and preserved not by a system of thought but by the Son of God, through the Word and Spirit. They were conscious as Rome was not that we have our treasure, also our theological treasure, "in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Cor. 4:7). Theological concepts, ideas, systems are not "infallible." Only the Word of God as something man does not initiate, as something independent of all human efforts to understand and formulate, is "this infallible rule" of which the Belgic Confession speaks in Article VII.

Theology is an ever-fresh speaking of God as revealed in Christ through the Holy Spirit. It is as Augustine said de divinitate ratio sive sermo, or as Coccejus put it, "a speaking of God, from God in His presence and to His glory." The Church does this in three distinct and distinguishable ways, all of them necessary for her "upbuilding."

She does so, (a) in her liturgy with the centrality of the Word, in sermon and sacraments. She does so as an outgrowth of this, (b) in the life and action of individual members confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in the whole scope of their existence. But she also does so in the critical self-examination of the language used by the Church in (a) and (b). Theology in this third sense is a self-testing of the language of the Church by the Church. All language which seeks to communicate ideas is human language and as human is never pure but always mixed with impurity, imperfection, and even error. Purity of the Word of God, as something which the Holy Spirit leads the Church to desire and strive for, imposes upon her the necessity of a "critical" theology as a service to the Gospel and to the well-being of the Church herself. Theology in this sense is not a dispensable option but a conditio sine qua non, without which the Church cannot be the Church of Jesus Christ. The truth will make her free from all falsehood, providing she submits to the leading of the Holy Spirit declaring and interpreting the Word of God to receptive believers.

Theology is not an abstruse science incapable of comprehension by the believing congregation. Once upon a time it was a thrilling activity in the Church, loved as a service to God in which the members were privileged to participate. This ideal we must recapture that there might

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4See Heidelberg Catechism, question and answer 54.
5De civ. Dei, VII.
6Summa Theologia, 1669, I. 1.
be a joyful and spontaneous (not a fearful and suspicious) theological activity to which God in his grace calls the Church as part of her service to him. In this sense theological activity is part of the liturgy of the Church. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews speaks to the Lord of the Church as the liturgist of holy things (Hebrews 8:2). The Church must here also follow her Lord. That is her *diakonia*, her ministry.

II

We all realize, I am sure, that when the Church begins to be stimulated theologically, there will be violent opposition and criticism. See what has already been aroused by the beginning efforts of the theological commission, and more is to follow—and understandably so. When people in the Church are asked to think about what they regard as their prized possessions, to enter critically into the sanctum sanctorum of their theological constructs, to be led to question the validity of their thought-forms and patterns, they resent it. And the resentment is often bitter and vituperative, indicative of a basic insecurity and uncertainty about the things most certainly believed.

This must be expected and partially endured in a Christian spirit. Paul came in for his share (and even our Lord) from those whose minds had stopped thinking about God’s gracious self-disclosure. If we love the Church and if we believe that her existence is threatened by a false devotion to what is not basic and central, we should not hesitate to do what the Holy Spirit moves us to do. Our minds and hearts, our hopes and fears should not be upon the resistance that will be generated but upon the God who calls us to be faithful, also and especially in our calling as theologians. Ultimately it is a question of God’s glory and the purity of his Word as the basis of the Church.

Let me mention a few of these resistance groups. There are the *pragmatists* who insist that *life* is more important than theology. They want to be *doers* of the Word. For them theology is a fruitless quibbling about speculative matters, an idle and useless concern of theologians too anemic for a vigorous active life. For the pragmatist, theology has no relevance either for life or for preaching. They are right, if they mean that the content of preaching is not theology but the gospel of Jesus Christ; but they are wrong in assuming that therefore theology has no relevance.

There is another group, the *togetherness folk*, who contend that theological stimulation will not be conducive to peace and harmony. Theological discussion, they maintain, engenders strife and hard feelings that mar and might even break the unity of the Church. If such were the net result of theological stimulation, we might hesitate with any proposals for contributing to such dire results. But I am convinced that
their fears are to be feared. In their fears they assume that the Church can endure even though it is not based on truth honestly arrived at and fearlessly affirmed. Truth, however, is sacred and its peremptory demand for honest obedience cannot be sloughed off by imaginary fears about the rending of the seamless robe of Christ. If church unity is so fragile a thing that theological discussion would disrupt it, it is not a unity on the basis of which she can vigorously function. Theological stimulation is a must for the Church if she is not to die for want of self-understanding and self-direction.

Then, there are the leave-well-enough-alone people, the a-theologians. They resist theological stimulation because they have no theology that might be stimulated. For them the Church and her message have no compelling theological basis. The Gospel for them has become an innocuous message of Rotarian good-will, not rooted in revelation. In their subconsciousness they have a dark foreboding of a vacuum, an awful abyss that abhors thinking, which they fear to face lest it swallow up what they think they possess. For the time being, keeping thinking at arm's remove gives them security, which they would rather not have disturbed by embarrassing theological questions. Let well enough alone is their slogan.

Then, there are the ax-grinders, those who resist not theological stimulation but theological stimulation of a certain kind. If theological stimulation is a matter of transmission in toto of a theology ready-made for consumption and digestion, which is their own theology, it will be heartily approved but not otherwise. The basic assumption underlying this position is that theology is not so much the intellectual articulation of the faith but its very form and substance, which has once-for-all been delivered to the saints. This must not be submitted to the questioning mind for consideration because that means the killing of the faith.

I think we can sympathize with their concern but must point out that what we see here is a subtle transposition in which the mind has moved from an ultimate loyalty to the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ to a secondary and derived loyalty, a theological formulation of the faith. If ever the Church needed theological stimulation, it is at this point, to make this basic distinction clear that the foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ is the Triune God of Revelation and not any system of thought however good.

What characterizes all these groups is a fear or dislike of thinking about and articulation of the Christian faith, a fear and dislike that is quite general throughout the Church. Thinking is not an activity in which the Reformed Church has specialized. For almost half of the time of her existence in the states, she was dependent upon the Classis of Amsterdam,
which did the thinking for her. This dependent spirit has not even now been sloughed off. In our more distant past, another spirit prevailed, a spirit nurtured by classical culture, which suggested for the Church the office of the *doctor ecclesiae*. Learning, Calvin held, was not a foreign commodity or a hidden importation nor an idle pursuit for the Christian. Calvin realized as we do not that faith without knowledge is blind. Faith for him meant a rigorous search from and of Scripture for insight, clarity, and understanding. Has anyone in the Christian Church burned himself out more completely in this task than Calvin?

Really, let us turn the tables on the fearful and insist boldly and loudly that any de-emphasis of the need for mature faith seeking insight and understanding should be considered heresy in the Reformed Church, a fifth column undermining the nature and function of faith. *Credimus ut intelligamus* must be our motto. The “upbuilding” of the church is at stake. In all these resistance groups there is a slumbering dogmatism that needs to be exposed as a fraud.

Let me parenthetically mention another slumbering dogma from which the Church needs to be awakened and liberated: the dogma that only ministers are guardians of the truth. There is an implicit clericalism in our church that is stifling the honest and free theological discussion which she desperately needs for her well-being. We forget that *the Apostles* were lay people described by their opponents as uncultured and common people. But these very people struggled with the process of understanding this new manifestation of God in Jesus Christ. And, all through the centuries since, this process has continued, sometimes more creatively than at other times, but always as a necessity laid upon the Church grasped and made captive by the Word of God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

What we need as a church is an awakening or rather an encouragement of talented lay people (and all of them have talents as gifts from Christ) to give their best thought to the understanding of the Christian Faith, which they as well as professional people profess as the truth of God about their life in time and in eternity.

III

In canvassing possible means of theological stimulation of the Church at large, we might first mention some already in existence or contemplated. The Theological Commission has begun its work auspiciously, even though it has already evoked opposition. Its continued efforts if not restrained will, I believe, increasingly encourage boldness of effort on the part of others. Its deliberations and publications will engender among us a new

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7. The phrase is Anselm’s and means “We believe that we may know.”
day of serious theological study in the self-understanding of the Church. That there are differences of point of view among us is recognized and should be welcomed as desirable, providing, of course, it does not lead to mutual distrust and unsympathetic misunderstanding.

Other committees, such as the Christian Action Committee, have from time to time brought before the church thought-provoking studies in the field of theological ethics. This sort of thing must be continued and encouraged, provided it is communicated to and studied by the constituency at large.

In addition to what is already done, I have a few suggestions for serious consideration, as possible creative means of theological stimulation. First, I suggest that General Synod should submit to serious and realistic scrutiny its modus operandi. Its present modus is that of listening to reports from boards, agencies, and institutions, adopting recommendations, often without thorough discussion and generally on the basis that brotherly and peaceful affections must be cultivated lest the esprit de corps, assumed to be weak and anemic, die in the process of being concerned with basic theological problems. Judging by the history with which I am personally familiar, General Synod considers theology unimportant, irrelevant, or dangerous. If I am right in characterizing the theological mood of General Synod, it should not surprise us that little appetite is aroused in the churches.

I am in no way trying to suggest that what transpires at Synod is unimportant. I am saying that serious theological discussion by our highest judicatory is conspicuously absent. And if this is true of Synod, we cannot expect matters to be different at the grass-roots. Every report, e.g. of the theological commission, should have free and full discussion on the floor of Synod and even in our denominational paper. How else can we dramatize, in a good sense, the extreme importance of these matters? What General Synod relegates to the periphery will be considered peripheral by the church at large. The question, however, cannot be suppressed whether by so doing we are not presuming to relegate the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, "the Lord and giver of Life" to the periphery. The Lord of the Church has promised his Spirit to lead her into the fulness of truth as it is in him. We should not resist the Spirit.

Secondly, since this topic has been assigned for consideration by the seminaries, it might not be amiss to suggest that reform should begin at home. Please do not consider that an impertinent suggestion of an inexperienced neophyte in theological education. The suggestion is not a critique of what has been done but a challenge to strive for greater effec-

9The writer of this paper has served only one year on one of the faculties.
tiveness. As professional people we must always and constantly ask ourselves what we aim to do, what our declared objective is. To say that we are preparing young men to be ministers of God's Word indicates the scope rather than the quality of our task. We prepare them by introducing them to biblical, historical, practical, and systematic theology and all that implies. But in the course of such training we should not only prepare them to be members of a profession discharging its obvious functions, but also see that the theological task to which we have introduced them is considered a never-ending one. Each new generation must give itself afresh to the study of theology. We cannot do the job for them. Our task is to give them the spirit of continuous inquiry, not an accomplished result they must appropriate. The Gospel has a once-for-all-ness which theology never has. If we succeeded more fully than we do in engendering the spirit of continuous theological inquiry in the students we teach, such a spirit would become contagious in the life of the congregations they serve.

I know that what I am suggesting will increase the inevitable tension which must characterize our labors. On the one hand, we must prepare these young men for passing their classical examinations creditably and, on the other hand, convince them that where the Church now stands theologically is not its final resting place. The tension should be cheerfully accepted as part of our task as responsible servants of the church of Jesus Christ. Here we should not be men of little faith, but of great faith, trusting the Holy Spirit and continuously offering ourselves as channels of his operation. We certainly must continue to prepare them to be faithful ministers of the Word in the congregations they serve. The office to which they are ordained, however, does not limit their service to the congregation. Their ordination is for service to the Word of God for the whole church. And they must be encouraged to express themselves much more than is now the case. There will be some, like young colts being broken to harness, who will take the bit in their teeth and run. That must be patiently borne too as part of the process of their maturing. Here also, let us not forget that the Holy Spirit rules and overrules.

To the end that there may be a denomination-wide organ for theological discussion and writing, I want to make a suggestion which in a sense is out of place, since it lies outside of my field of responsibility. I would like to see the Reformed Review made into a journal published by the two seminaries as a cooperative venture, or, if not by the seminaries, then by an association or society of people drawn from all parts of the church speaking to the church. Such a journal published on a broader foundation than its present one would be a potent means for the theological stimulation.
The suggestion is not made as though the present Review has not, under present auspices, rendered very excellent service. It is the only organ in our denomination now in which serious theological discussion is carried on publicly. But even so, it is "sectional" and as such will not and cannot be considered as an organ for stimulating theology in the church at large. While its editorial policy has not been sectional, in the mind of the church it is viewed as an agency of one of our institutions for the expression of a point of view which is considered sectional.

I know that the Review is well-enough established to be able to continue its present service and even to extend it. But the value of its service would be increased immeasurably if it were predicated upon a denominational basis. Only from such a base can be laid low the vicious assumption, not founded on fact, that the Reformed Church is two churches. For the good of our denomination we should do everything in our power to proceed upon the faith that the church is one, that there are no basic disagreements, that the one voice of Jesus Christ in the power of his Spirit is the only voice in the church.

If Western Seminary is convinced that it needs the Reformed Review as an organ of promotion, and its issuance on a denominational basis for them is not possible, then I suggest that in addition there should be a journal for the whole church, published by a group of men from the West and the East, representing the whole church, composed of lay people as well as ministers, whose responsibility it will be to publish a journal devoted to a discussion of theological questions. To initiate such a venture, I would suggest that the General Synod underwrite or subscribe its budget. Our denominational paper cannot be such an organ of expression. The editorial policies of The Church Herald and of the venture here suggested are of necessity different and cannot serve the same function.

In addition to the previous suggestion, I believe that the seminaries might pool their resources to publish periodically an extended monograph dealing with basic theological problems in a scholarly fashion. The opportunity to publish a solid piece of theological thinking should be extended to all people in the Reformed Church as well as to others. There are in our denomination budding as well as mature theologians capable of serious and solid work, who now are stymied because our church offers no means of publishing scholarly work. To publish privately is always costly and therefore prohibitive. Men (and women too) who have talent and the urge to think and write on theological subjects should have readily accessible a channel through which they may render a service. Subscriptions and some subsidization by the two seminaries and even by the colleges would sustain financially such a venture. Its editorial policy should give freedom of expression providing the work is scholarly and
honestly motivated. Moreover, the faculties of our educational institutions would be challenged by this possible channel of expression to more creative work than is now made public.

Over and above all this, we need throughout the church “An Agency of Renewal,” such as the “evangelical academies” in Germany and “Kerk en Wereld” in the Netherlands. The name is relatively unimportant, except as it ought to indicate what the function of such an agency is. What is needed throughout the church (not just on our seminary and college campuses) are places for lay people to meet, not for the purpose of becoming agents of promotion for the program of the church, but for serious consideration of what the theology of revelation is. We have been concerned and rightly so with the training of an “official” ministry. But we have not been concerned as a church with the training of lay people to be theologically-literate participants in her life and movement. Even the official lay leadership is woefully ignorant regarding basic theological matters. There is too little of a basic and realistic self-understanding of the church by the church of her nature and position in the world.

Such an agency of renewal as here envisioned must not be conceived as a means of propaganda and promotion. I recognize that boards, institutions, and agencies in the church have need of such service. But what is needed is something other and more basic and prior. We do not lack for promotion but we do lack basic understanding of the uniqueness of the Church as a “divine” institution. And yet, I do discern in a number of lay people a kind of innocent premonition of the strategic importance of the Church, which they cannot articulate for want of a basic theology.

To stimulate theologically the Church at large cannot be done globally. It must be done in a more decentralized fashion through creative centers of renewal in all parts of the Church and on a continuing basis, where lay people come together in the spirit of the fathers to study and clarify their thinking regarding the nature and function of the Church of Jesus Christ, as her response to biblical revelation.

The lay people desired are not only the pious folk of well-meaning intentions but the best educated minds and the most active people in “secular” vocations. Too long has the Church neglected these persons to her own hurt. She has been afraid of them, anticipating that encouragement of their thinking might explode the status quo of the Church as a functioning institution in society.

To be effective, such an agency must be predicated on complete freedom of thought. Any attempt to bridle its utterance is foredoomed to failure from the point of view of the renewal of the Church. The spirit
in which such an agency is to be established and carried on must be one of trust, confidence, and above all, faith in the power of the Holy Spirit and the Gospel of Jesus Christ to lead our people into all truth. Whatever leadership this agency needs should come as much as possible from the lay people themselves. There are among us theologically-literate lay people, devoted to the Gospel and the Church, who could be used to direct democratically these breeding centers of renewal, striving to elicit a self-understanding of the Church by the Church, as life in the Spirit.

It is best, I am sure, if the ordained clergy for the most part look on. They might be used on request as resource people or as those who assist in the preparation of study-guides, but not as official leaders organizing and directing activities. The more completely it is run by lay people for lay people the better. If the suggestion appear bold, it is well to remember that God has often used lay people for reviving his Church. Tertullian, Cyprian, Calvin are cases in point. Accordingly, for its organization and administration, I suggest putting it in the Department of Lay Evangelism with a co-director who is a lay person. Under the aegis of this department an agency of renewal as here sketched could become a reality for the good of the church.