A Dynamically Conservative Theology?

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One year ago Time magazine headlined the question "Is God Dead?" Four ways out of the present theological impasse over the meaningfulness of the word "God" were briefly discussed: "stop talking about God for awhile, stick to what the Bible says, formulate a new image and concept of God using contemporary thought categories, or simply point the way to areas of human experience that indicate the presence of something beyond man in life" (April 8, 1966, p. 85). None of these seems satisfactory in itself for proclaiming a dynamic, revolutionary Christian gospel in our day.

If the first suggestion means that we should talk about Jesus rather than God, it ignores the basic question of "God in Christ reconciling the world unto himself." The second, "stick to the Bible," provides an indispensable starting point providing we are willing to really deal with the questions of interpretation and communication. As a philosopher I find the appeal to contemporary language for restating the theistic message, program three, both attractive and dangerous. We cannot communicate without listening to the language and the questions of those to whom we wish to speak, but it must be the eternal, dynamic Word which the Christian exemplifies and proclaims. Time's fourth proposal is vague and turns from the question of proclaiming the message of God to the suggestion (an important one at that) that modern man may find himself forced to raise the question of God as he faces the disturbing personal and social perplexities of our kind of world. As a simple recognition that in some situations men are more open to the "still small voice of God" than in others, the point has merit and good ambassadors for God have not been unmindful of it in the past. Still there must be the witness of God's people and the clear voice of the prophet if men are to find God in their hour of need in all of his grace and fulness.

Social Action?

Many religiously inclined, activistic Americans feel that another kind of answer is needed, a non-theological one. Bishop Sheen recently spoke against the social comforts of the "secular city" and urged men to establish their concerns where God was really acting, in the "inter city."

God is dead in the Secular City. God lives in the Inner City. If you would find God, walk among the poor, the overcrowded, the hungry;
bring them bread, take them into your homes, buy them clothes, help them rebuild their huts, forget their insults possibly justified by their lowliness, and I assure you that you will find God. And that is the only way that God will ever get back into the Secular City. (World Journal Tribune, Feb. 25, 1967, p. 7)

This is a vital part of the dynamic of the Christian gospel. It challenges us to make God alive, so to speak, not simply by preaching but by acting in Christ's name. Some of its advocates, however, want the "cup of cold water" but not the name of Christ, and certainly not "dogma"!

Donald Smith, until recently the controversial president of the student body at Iowa State University, spoke at the end of March before a group of Lutheran ministers in Des Moines who were concerned about the organized church and its loss of contact with the youth. Smith, a former Roman Catholic, stated, "Dogma is unimportant to me and other college students... The church is washed up unless it starts attacking the ills of society such as ending war and poverty." The second sentence merits serious consideration. And "dogma" in the sense of mere pronouncements we could do without. But we are wrong-headed indeed if we think that it is enough to have compassionate action while remaining ignorant or unconcerned about the theological basis for a Christian ethical response to our fellow man.

A Conservative Theology?

To me, the vital Christian life in both its individual and social dimensions calls for a dynamically conservative theology. I use the word "conservative" not because I want to make an issue of mere labels—call me a Calvinist Christian if you like. As a former political scientist colleague used to tell the undergraduates, "It is not the label, but what is in the bottle that really counts." I use the word conservative because I am convinced that in the Word of God and in a Christian life and world view we have something worth conserving, dynamically conserving. We have a great heritage in the reformed faith. A reforming and vital Christian faith has, I believe, in the past produced fruitful results in the church and in the cultural world. Whether it can be revolutionary and bear fruit today will depend upon our genuine interest in biblical theology and upon our willingness to listen and understand, to accept others for what they are and for what they can be in Jesus Christ. It will be by the grace of God, too, since you and I will fall short of the ideal.

In my own case it was because I came into contact with other Christians who manifested some of this contagious vitality that my interest was aroused. I came under very forceful exegetical preaching when my family joined the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. The reasonableness of Dr. Barnhouse's preaching and the warmth of his life appealed to the whole man: intellectual, emotional, and volitional. We could use more such products of our seminaries and graduate schools today to impress our youth with the value of being keen students of the
Book and of seeking to apply its teachings actively in social and philosophic outlook.

I was fortunate also in having a Sunday school teacher with a doctorate in science who helped me to get my bearings on the creation-evolution question. It was not so much the "answers" that we produced that were important, but the informed openness with which we could discuss the issues. Later, I came to realize more fully that Isaiah and Paul, Augustine and Calvin were not so much concerned with the details of the process of creation, interesting though they are, as they were with the implications of the sovereignty of the creating-redeeming God of the Scriptures. He is the judge over all human pretension, for example. On this ground Isaiah (44) could condemn all forms of the idolization of men, nations, and cultures. In our day of sacred cows in our secular and ecclesiastical cities we can surely see the need for the dynamic conservation of this great biblical teaching.

Theological Direction in Scholarship

Scholarship in all fields today greatly needs well-trained people who have the kind of Christian theistic orientation which is dynamically conservative. For one thing, in all fields in which the ethical and cultural value issues arise we need a vital and objective basis for overcoming the relativistic inadequacies of "new moralities" and "situationalistic ethics."

In the area of Old and New Testament studies, it has certainly been the theologically conservative students who have taken the Bible with sufficient seriousness to really learn to feel at home with the original languages of the text. They are concerned to get their interpretations just the way any good student of English literature does by doing a contextual study which is grammatical and historical and which takes into account the cultural situation in which the writer himself lived. Christians should be interested in the fruitful results of this scholarly work in biblical literature and archaeology which supports the general reliability of the Bible in its historical and cultural references.

Please note that I am not suggesting that the dynamic conservative is one who thinks it is his task to prove that there are no errors in the extant Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. Rather, he is interested in what the Bible actually has to say, in how it is revelatory of God and his Son Christ, and, finally, in how it continues to speak to us in our generation to provide us with newness of life and a new dynamic for our personal and social existence.

The Modern Mind

You will recognize that this approach and attitude stands in sharp contrast to some others, such as that of the noted German New Testament scholar, Rudolf Bultmann. He is responsible for a good bit of the talk popular in some circles about demythologizing the Bible and existentializing its meaning in order to make it "meaningful" to the modern mind. Paul Tillich, whose philosophy of history I analyzed in my own doctoral study at Columbia and whose ideas as a philosopher
and theologian have excited me a great deal, has pushed much the same point of view. Both men have made important contributions to scholarship which conservatism must take into account. But the whole idea of whittling away on the Bible until what you have left is what is acceptable to the so-called modern mind is a poor substitute for a careful historical-contextual approach. The logical outcome of this via negativa may well be the announcement: God is dead! Philosopher Herbert Feigl of the University of Minnesota has well said that "demythologization in theology, if carried out completely, leaves us with nothing but pictorial, emotional, or motiveative [existential] expressions and appeals." Like the older logical positivism's treatment of metaphysics and ethics, it gives us a kind of "logical striptease," he says, that ends up with only the "bare particulars" ("The Power of Positivistic Thinking," Presidential Address, American Philosophical Association, Columbus, Ohio, May 3, 1963).

As one conservative student of the New Testament has put it, "It is far from proven that these concessions to the modern viewpoint have been successful in removing barriers which keep men from becoming Christians. Some men have intellectual difficulties, to be sure, but the real barrier has always been man's sin and self-sufficiency. Furthermore, what is accomplished if men find the way to Christ made easy only to discover in the end a warped and shrunken Christ" (Everett F. Harrison, Contemporary Evangelical Thought, ed. by Carl Henry, Harper, 1957, p. 56)?

The Challenge

The dynamic, conservative Christian is one who is anxious to understand himself and his fellow man in today's world and he is anxious to see how the word of God centering in the redemptive message of the Christ speaks to the real spiritual needs of men today who are willing to leave themselves open in heart and mind to the witness of his Holy Spirit.

That is the ideal. In reality we come back to the biblical formula: "by their fruits ye shall know them." I see great possibilities ahead for the conservative Christian providing he remains dynamically open and activistic in manifesting the Christ-centered life with compassion and understanding in our needy world. The practical fruit that has appeared thus far is quite impressive and yet frequently taken for granted.

There is a great deal more that needs to be done. And here I must come back to the twenty-five-and-under Men of the Year, the generation I find so challenging in the classroom and on the campus. Under God you are the ones who can step into the contemporary stream with a dynamic Christian heritage and well-prepared in your chosen vocations. Some of you can become the biblical scholars and theologians, the linguists working with the translators who are making the Bible and religious literature available around the world. Some will become a C. S. Lewis, a Dorothy Sayer, a Herbert Butterfield, or a Chad Walsh of the immediate future. Some of you may be called of God as medical missionaries or as contributors to
a vital Christian philosophy of life. You may use your zeal and knowledge as Christ's statesmen, economists, and scientists in helping to meet the social problems which threaten the very existence of millions of people today. I hope you will not find the rest of us "dragging our feet." May the Word of God and the love of Christ constrain us together as individuals and as a Church to rededicate ourselves to his great purposes for our lives. Only then can we be both Reformed and truly Christian.