

# The Peril in Modernizing the Gospel

## *A Meditation on the Vocation of the Teacher*

By Paul S. Minear

*AS A CHRISTIAN* I am inclined to view every follower of Jesus Christ as a teacher of the Word, in spite of the injunction in the Epistle of James: "My brothers, not many of us should become teachers, for you may be certain that we who teach shall ourselves be judged with greater strictness" (3:1 NEB). We should not lightly brush aside this warning inasmuch as it appears also in the Gospel of Matthew with its blunt woes against blind guides and with its devastating reminder that we will each be judged according to every word which we speak.

In spite of this warning, I say, I consider every Christian a teacher, and a steward of the gospel. In every congregation, each disciple learns from all his brothers. Every congregation has its teachers and pastors. In every school of faith there are teachers of teachers, in every seminary there are teachers of teachers of teachers. In fact, some of us believe that *the succession of teachers* is no less important to the life of the one church than the succession of apostles, prophets and bishops.

Whether or not that belief is justified, this occasion provides the impulse for us all to think soberly about the work of teaching, and especially of teaching the New Testament. Such reflection will properly maintain its orbit around two realities:

- (a) the work of Jesus Christ as Teacher (a role which should not hastily be scorned as less redemptive than his other roles), and
- (b) the work of men in our day who are enrolled under *his* instruction. He is a living teacher as we are living disciples: Therefore his gospel is always modern—or if you prefer, contemporary. He is the same today as yesterday, and we are one with the Twelve: therefore his gospel remains the same, whatever may happen to it as it passes through our classrooms. I assume, therefore, that the gospel is modern, because it is always addressed to us in the *today* of faith. But I also assume that when we modernize it, fear and faithlessness lead us to adulterate and to weaken it. This is why I invite you to explore with me the peril of modernizing this gospel.

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We should begin, perhaps, by trying to locate ourselves on the map of recent theological work. On that map the segment marked "biblical theology" has been steadily expanding. Almost twenty years ago, when the journal *Theology Today* was being launched, I was brash enough to volunteer an essay under the title: "Wanted—a Biblical Theology." Now in 1961 I must confess that this *want* has been amply satisfied. At least, we have had many books produced under this rubric. And every one is talking about biblical theology, even though all too few are engaged in the scientific disciplines and in the scholarly hack-work necessary for valid theological formulation. Nevertheless the significance of biblical theology is more highly appraised now than two decades ago.

During these two decades scholars have concentrated on clarifying the content of the earliest *kerygma* and the earliest confessions. Where a distinction has been drawn between kerygmatic and systematic theology, the emphasis has fallen on the former. Where a distinction has been drawn between the earliest confessions and the later creeds, the emphasis has fallen on the earlier. For basic direction we have looked toward the pristine gospel and its intrinsic corollaries. Because the gospel expressed a thoroughly eschatological perspective, biblical theology has concentrated on the eschatological elements, in its efforts to comprehend the ultimacy, the universality, the radicality of the revolution announced by the gospel.

Because this eschatology was defined by the work of Jesus Christ, biblical theology has been forced to stress the Christological focus. Christian thought has struggled to recover the true comprehension of Jesus' work as the Messiah, the Son of God, the conqueror of cosmic and historical powers, the Lord of the world and the church; in short, the Alpha and Omega. There are occasional and healthy protests against the dangers of Christocentrism, but the very protests underscore the fact that biblical theology has been unable to avoid an obsession with Christology.

We have been unable, in turn, to deal with the centrality of Jesus Christ in the New Testament without finding the center of this center in the death and resurrection of this man. If we may refer, by way of analogy, to the sequence of thought in Mark 8:27 f.—first has come the recapture of Peter's confession: "Thou art the Christ" (8:29). But this Christological confession has led theologians to the next step where Jesus sought to correct Peter's confession, and where Peter, on his part, resisted the correction: "The Son of Man must suffer many things. . . ." (8:31). Theologians are now being led with Peter to accept that permanent correction: they have moved steadily forward from theology to eschatology to Christology, and then to the *pathein* or the *pathemata*—to *pathology*, if you will, the redemptive pathology of God's Son.

But in the Gospel of Mark the sequence of thought moves directly to a further lesson which the teacher gave to the twelve, a lesson equally pathological because it stressed the divine necessity of suffering on the part of each student: "Anyone who wishes to be a follower of mine must leave self behind; he must take up his cross and come with me. Whoever cares for his own safety is lost . . ." (8:34 NEB). If we are shocked by calling this pathological, how shocked would we be by the actual weakness and folly of bearing the disciple's cross?

I am suggesting that biblical theology, when it follows the order and logic of the New Testament, leads us to the point where we hear again these terrifying demands of Jesus. We cannot doubt that the crucified Messiah called every disciple to his own crucifixion, that this teacher made this *skandalon* absolutely binding. Or that he defined this *skandalon* in terms of rejecting that earthly security which is coveted by men and guarded by their economic and religious institutions? If we modernize such a gospel, *without relaxing this demand*, who will greet it as *good news*? None. Yet if we evaporate this demand, the message ceases to be *news* at all. Here, it seems to me, we disclose the root of all the major perils in modernizing the gospel, the tap-root of genuine heresy. In all honesty, we must admit that the fear of Jesus' demands saturates much of our sub-conscious and conscious thinking as Christians. It constantly feeds our suppressed sense of guilt, for we know that, when his teachings are relayed through our hands, we wittingly or unwittingly pull the fuse from this bomb so that the intended explosion is avoided.

In this regard, I have begun to be suspicious even of the furore over the revival of biblical theology. So many of us have adopted with such enthusiasm the fashionable jargon, yes even the Christocentric jargon, that we must be concealing something behind our eagerness. Does infatuation with theology become a subtle way of avoiding the dilemmas of obedience? Do we listen so hard for the correct Christological analogy in order to silence the one who says: "Why do you keep exalting me as Lord without obeying my commands?" Have we become engrossed in the work of theological formulation because the work of obeying the Sermon on the Mount in this world inexorably attracts the fury of Satan? Have we forgotten the obvious historical truth that the light of the *kerygma* began to dawn on the disciples not only after they had been offended by Jesus' crucifixion but also—and only—after they had accepted the terrifying task which had been defined by that crucifixion? As scholars we reiterate the observation that full Christian faith was possible only after the cross and the resurrection. But do we stress the twin-truth that this same faith (and the authentic theology which articulates it) is possible only to those disciples who enlist in the same dangerous mission? "The student is not above his teacher."

In any case the New Testament allows no ambiguity. Gospel and demand are so fused together that every follower must jettison all thoughts of safety and security. What, then, are the perils of modernizing that gospel? It has, in one sense, already been thoroughly modernized. The land of the Pilgrims has become the home of insurance companies. A so-called Christian country has decided to make and to store a supply of nuclear bombs capable of annihilating countries and possibly the world—in the name of national security. And how many churches are even aware of this when they join in the Lord's Prayer? Or, if aware, how many are made uneasy by their awareness? Look in the mirror. What do we teachers see? We have been teaching and preaching the gospel of Jesus. Yet we and our people worship week after week with only the slightest twinge of suspicion that this gospel is the greatest threat to our social or personal security. We have preached . . ., they have believed . . ., with the result of enhancing earthly security. Last month one of our strongest churches invited members to attend the Good Friday service. "Those of us who annually allow our hearts to be wrung as we contemplate the agony of Jesus on His cross are invited to attend the service on Good Friday for as long a time as we can spare."

On Good Friday a man was executed as a traitor, an enemy both of the state and of the temple. But this story, in our preaching, has lost its threat. We teach and preach on the assumption that in becoming better Christians people will become better Americans. We have recently heard diatribes against the churches or against their councils, accusing their leaders of being unAmerican. What kind of rebuttals are given? Not a fearless confession of faith in an unAmerican Lord but anxious denials of subversion and infiltration. And to our shame, some of us join in charging a particular Christian communion as, in fact, unAmerican because of an allegiance which transcends the nation. In one of my books, the editor made only one suggestion of a change in content—a sentence which ventured to suggest that allegiance to Christ makes men potential traitors in any country. Why do I mention this? Simply to underscore the perils faced by teachers who modernize the gospel of a Jewish rebel in our nationalistic age.

When the first teachers in the church were accomplishing their task it was clear to them that the gospel of Christ was as great a threat to racism as to nationalism. If we know the situation in our American churches—and it would be hard to remain ignorant—we must confess that the majority of contemporary followers of Christ are quite unaware of this threat. We have preached, we have taught, but, in believing, our students have detected nothing inherently incompatible between faith in Jesus and their current social prejudices. What kind of teaching is this? Consider, by way of example,

our own attitudes toward those who are called Jews. I recently was permitted to read a letter addressed to another minister, which reads:

I want to thank you for helping me spiritually in my sorrow over the loss of my wife, who died as an Orthodox Jewess. I shall never forget your prayers and your attendance in the synagogue at her funeral and at her grave. . . . The way you explain the teachings of Jesus for me as a Jew are indicative of the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was (and is) more than a great Teacher, even more than a prophet in Israel. I can think of Him as the Messiah if the Gentiles who profess his name would show me, a Jew, the same kindness which I find in your home and heart. . . . Why don't I find this love . . . manifested by other Christians?

My point is not that Christians are knowingly disloyal to Jesus' orders, but that they are unaware that these are his orders for them, and that they assume they can believe in him without any change in the pattern of their social prejudices. Their teachers and preachers have well earned their stipends by feeding this deception.

The same self-deception is reflected in much current thinking on Christian unity. Early Christians, on accepting the gospel, were made one by their partnership in it. Obedience to Jesus' demands produced among them a *unity in diversity* which gave to the church its genuine catholicity. They could not believe in Jesus as the Christ without discovering in their belief an amazing family tie to all other believers, Jew and Greek, barbarian and Scythian. Unity was something intrinsic to the gospel—"one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one hope that belongs to our calling." Today the demand for Christian unity appears as an extra, a fad, something which may be encouraged within limits, but not after all the test of whether the gospel which we have taught *is* the gospel, or whether our belief in it *is* true belief of or a magnificent self-deception.

I must pause in what must seem to be something of a vendetta against the contemporary church. My intention has not been to diagnose the current forms of blindness but to indicate the setting in which we New Testament teachers must do our work. On us has devolved responsibility for clarification of the New Testament faith, of both the gospel *and*, we add, the *Law*. We work in the midst of a revival of biblical theology and yet within churches where George Bernard Shaw's jibe rings all too true: "For God's sake, don't attack the church. It's the only thing that stands between us and Christianity." Our task as teachers is to modernize the gospel. The only question is not whether or not to modernize it, but only how to accomplish that task.

The development of biblical theology may be of very great help, but only if it leads to a genuine biblical ethics which will preserve the eschatological radicalism of the prophet of Nazareth. The churches, to be sure, do not want this radicalism, but they need it. To be sure, Jesus has never been

primarily concerned with either the *wants* of the church or its *needs* but only with his ministry to the world. And for the sake of that ministry he is a consuming fire to disciples who would turn his gospel into a spurious and insipid doctrine. That is what happens when either the cross of Jesus or the cross of his church fails to generate united and disciplined action by the congregation or denomination. And every American congregation I know is unable to take such united and disciplined action. To shape that action more will be needed, of course, than a mere repetition of the commands of the gospels. The church will require help from every theological, sociological and psychological discipline. It will need to support deep-going, thorough, sustained study of the forms which obedience to Christ will take within and against the institutions and laws of our day. But unless New Testament teachers recapture the blunt and terrifying demands of Jesus, so as to indicate to all of us the sword of judgment of him under whose orders we stand, the other disciplines will be useless to him in his ministry to the world.

It is an awesome vocation which we share. We have been called to teach the gospel. To refuse to make it contemporary would be treason to it. But to domesticate it within the behavior patterns of our churches is even greater treason. The only course left is to choose the homeland to which we become traitor, to do our assigned work from day to day, listening to the teacher, taking heed, as he so frequently urged, how we hear, for if the deaf teach the deaf, they will both be caught in the same "acoustical illusion." God grant us the ears to hear what the Spirit is now saying to the churches.



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