

Chapter 1

The Human Search for Meaning

Man seeks for meaning and finds it in different ways. As he finds meaning, he achieves a sense of value and of the worthwhileness of life and lives his human life out of those values. Such values differ in various human cultures and societies, and within a given culture from person to person, because human beings are the products of traditions of thinking and acting. Man is never contextless. Should he find meaning in human life at any given time and place, it will be because through what he knows and what he does he finds that which integrates his own life and personality and which enables him to come to terms with both his personal and nonpersonal environments.

One of the ways in which many people have found meaning has been through the comfort and demand of a religious perspective. The point we wish to stress here is that unless such religious perspective is connected with the search for meaning and gives a living meaning to human life and thought, it remains abstract and dogmatic.

A fundamental question that theology must address is this: Is there something within human experience that provides a ground for faith and upon which the demand for a particular commitment of faith within a particular tradition has meaning?

For example, if I see the world as purposeless and irrational, that perspective would not provide a favorable context for faith in God, whom Christians describe as having a good purpose that is in the process of fulfillment. Some attention would therefore have to be given to the interpretation of my experience of the world before I could entertain a theistic perspective. Alternatives to a fatalistic or nonpurposeful attitude would have to be proposed before I could even be ready to entertain, let alone experience, the concept of a God with good purposes. That Christian proposals about God are experienced as valid requires certain presuppositions and predispositions. At the least, one must be prepared to suppose that these preconceptions may be right.

Setting for Belief in God

This leads to other questions: What makes the proper setting for theistic belief? Are there certain kinds of experience that lead us on, as

SPEAKING WELL OF GOD

it were, to that which is beyond human experience? How, if at all, are we brought to that which transcends experience? If it is right, as we believe it is, to look within human experience for the preconditions that make statements about God meaningful, to which dimension or dimensions of such experience shall we look? For if we find none, there will be no “place” for faith.

The alternatives are either that we find no such preconditions or that we find preconditions and presuppositions which are uncongenial to Christian faith in God. A person who sincerely holds points of view that are at odds with fundamental theistic perspectives will have no capacity for theistic faith unless such uncongenial presuppositions can be replaced. This can be accomplished, if at all, only by patient clarification and possibly by sensible and reasonable confrontation of opposite points of view.

Where a value-system is held that is consonant with or congenial to Christianity, it may be necessary to show the unity of such a value-system with that of theism before Christian faith can become possible. Thus the question arises: How does Christian faith and its teaching clarify the meaning that one has already experienced and lived by? Another question then presses: How can one’s understanding of God connect with one’s knowledge of the world, with one’s convictions about society and human relations, and with one’s beliefs about the self and the personality? We must never deny truth for the sake of promoting truth. Hence we must assume that we can relate our Christian theism to our knowledge - of science or of ethics, for example.

Since no one is without a value-system, the theist who wished to make a case for his faith must persuasively answer the question: “Why should I change my set of values when I find them satisfying and resting upon reasonable grounds?” The alternative is to dogmatize. But then the propositions become abstract, and faith is replaced by assent or by dissent.

We must not underestimate the difficulty of the problems involved or the difficulty of the process of clarification and commendation of Christian theism. Consider two examples. First, a humanist is committed to the betterment of society but assumes no transcendent reference of any kind. Since he is content with assumptions based on the possibility of human good, he will ask, when his humanist ethic is questioned, “What more can the Christian faith give me?” Or he may

SPEAKING WELL OF GOD

ask the more practical question, “What better does the Christian ethic do in the world?”

Second, a Muslim is committed to belief in Allah - “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet.” He shares that belief in some respects with the Judeo-Christian tradition from which it was drawn. He may likely ask the Christian, “Why speak in Trinitarian terms about God, when this compromises His sovereignty and unity?”

Changing

We shall better understand the perspective from which this book is written if we consider carefully what is involved in the process of a person’s changing from one way of life to another. It is a much more complex and far-reaching process than that in which someone simply changes his mind.

The New Testament calls this complex process of change “conversion” and “repentance.” The distinctive word is *metanoia*, and the verb is *metanoed*. “Repentance” and “to repent” denote a change in the person rather than simply a change of mind. The word for the latter is *metamelomai*.

Paul, in recounting his witnessing, speaks of “testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance to God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21). John the Baptist announced, “Repent” (Mark 1:15). His baptism is called a “baptism of repentance” (verse 4). Jesus’ disciples during their preaching-healing tour “went out and preached that men should repent” (Mark 6:12). In doing this they followed the lead set by Jesus, who realistically taught what discipleship would involve and then invited his hearers to change to the new way of life. God rejoices over the change, and the note of joy cannot be missed from the Gospels. “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.... Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:7, 10).

Jesus read his miracles as a sign of God’s power at work in him, and he challenged those who witnessed them to see them as God’s demand for a change in their manner of life. “The men of Nineveh will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Luke 11:32). The change demanded is not simply a modification of the old way of life, patching it up here a little and there

SPEAKING WELL OF GOD

a little. A radical change is needed. New teachings require new attitudes. A new revelation of God demands a total reorientation of the life. It is not like putting new wine into old bottles. New wineskins must be provided. It's not like patching up an old garment with a piece of new cloth. That's no good. The change demanded is radical. Old practices must go, along with the rules that governed them. The new has come. "New wine is for fresh skins" (Mark 2:22).

However, the more radical the change that is demanded, the less it would seem one can achieve it. If we wanted to make the change, how could we do it? Not, surely, by merely wanting or even willing it. Much as I would like to be a research chemist, if I am a secretary or a businessman with only a superficial knowledge of science and two thirds of my life gone, it is, to say the least, a remote possibility. It is not impossible in every case, but it is highly improbable in an overwhelming majority of cases. I cannot simply by an act of will make such a change. If it takes place at all, the new state of affairs must grow upon me or I will have to grow into the new person I wish to be.

Since human beings are shaped by their context and by their background, a real and radical change in their person takes place only with a change of context. But one cannot make such a change in an instant, although I can decide to initiate a process that will end in my becoming what I now am not. I can will in a certain way, and I can take certain steps to effect the process that will fulfill my purpose.

New Testament Imagery

A consideration of New Testament imagery will be illuminating at this point. Several figures of speech suggest the passage from one way of life to another: the idea of passing from the state of being aliens to that of becoming citizens; the idea of entering the kingdom of God; and the idea of being born again. Each analogy suggests a more or less drastic passage from one condition to another, and in each case the resultant state is that of Christian discipleship.

"So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:19, 20). It is a mixed metaphor - citizenship and building. The point of the Scripture is clear, however. The passage from alienation to citizenship involves the adoption of a new set of traditions. One enters into the history that has been shaped by the declaration and witness of prophet and apostle.

SPEAKING WELL OF GOD

Previously, these were quite alien, but now they become part of the fabric of life. New modes of thinking and behaviour are learned, along with a new vocabulary and a new set of standards of judgment. Indeed, to become a citizen when one had been an alien involves becoming a different person.

Since the change in accepting Jesus Christ as the foundation of life and community is so radical, the following Biblical passage speaks of a hostility that changes to reconciliation. “And you, who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death” (Colossians 1:21, 22). The enemy has become a friend. The weapons have been put down. The two parties are together. A sweeping change has taken place.

We have said that becoming a new person involves adapting a new history, and that takes time. You were once (or “aforetime” as the King James Version translates the Greek word *pote*) in a condition diametrically opposed to your present one. But time has passed, and in the passage of time you have come to know a new allegiance, you have adopted a new set of values, you have set aside your old attitudes, and you have become reconciled to that which you previously had fought. You have embraced a new history. In between the once and the now, time has been filled with learning, encounter, and resolve. Put in the earlier figure of speech, your “commonwealth [“citizenship”] is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20).

This suggests the familiar phrase in the Gospels, “the kingdom of heaven” or “the kingdom of God.” Jesus calls his hearer to enter the kingdom of God whatever the cost. It involves the reorientation of the total being. It is like the demand of a country that the goods, attitudes, and relationships that constituted one’s whole former life be given up and replaced as a condition for granting citizenship. That is no mean change, and the incentive must be great for anyone to embark on the course that might lead to such total reorientation.

Jesus never underplayed the difficulty of his demand. The apostles and evangelists similarly portrayed the demand in its stark unconditionality. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25). “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). In view of the difficulties that discipleship would lead

SPEAKING WELL OF GOD

to, Paul and Barnabas went about “strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

While this is not the place for an extended discussion of the term “kingdom,” let us take the synonym “realm” as its equivalent. The realm of values of the kingdom of God stands opposed to other realms of value. To pass from one to the other is like being made over again. Indeed, to be newly born was one way of symbolically describing the change, as Jesus did to Nicodemus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). It is like starting afresh with a decisive act that wipes out the past and puts us onto a new future. It takes time. It takes will.

More Than Willing

But it takes more than will. I cannot become a citizen of another state merely by an act of will. However, I can and I must will. Similarly the enlistment of the will is important in the process by which conversion to theism takes place. I cannot by an act of will make myself have faith in God, but I can exercise my will to the extent that I can put myself in the context in which faith may be nurtured and then renew that initial act of will by continuing within the new context.

There is, thus, a voluntaristic element in Christian faith. However, a warning is necessary here so that we can avoid the dogmatism already mentioned. We can will to set ourselves within the context where faith may take place and continue. But there is a big difference between placing oneself within the influence of the community of faith and attempting by an act of will to believe that which we do not understand because we would like to believe it, because we find other people believing it, or because we feel some sort of compulsion to believe.

Finally, the Christian believer must be ready to meet the objection that it is only because he does not understand what he says he believes that he is able to believe it. Such belief is not Christian belief. For if he were to try to understand what he says he believes but really does not, he would then find it impossible to hold onto that belief. To believe what one does not understand at all is to be unreasonable.

The point we wish to stress here is that the meanings which we find in life connect us with faith in God and that for the idea of God to be meaningful - hence, understandable and understood - it must connect with the meanings we find in life. There are dimensions of

SPEAKING WELL OF GOD

human experience that provide the ground for talk about God. Otherwise such talk is abstract - unconnected with meanings that we can accept and with truths that we hold in our daily living - and is thus arbitrary and unreasonable.

Is man so secular that there is no “space” for God? Has science rendered the Christian talk about God meaningless? Does the problem of evil make incomprehensible the idea that the world is purposive and that God is good? Is man so shaped by the values of society that nothing but the shaping of society accounts for his beliefs? Is it true that the future of the human race is a matter for conjecture and that a theistic answer is a poor alternative, by comparison, to others? In the last analysis, is faith in God a subjective affair, chosen by the believer for good reasons that a psychologist may confidently give?

We shall have to find an answer to these pressing questions as we discuss the Christian teaching concerning God.