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PROBLEMS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE
(Another in a series)

THE THEOLOGICAL GAP

by T. B. Maston

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There has been in recent years considerable discussion of various kinds of gaps, such as the generation gap and the credibility gap. Another gap that should concern Christians is the theological gap.

The theological gap, as is true of other gaps, may not be bridged entirely, but we hope that the people on both sides of the gap will be spiritually mature enough to maintain channels of communication. As long as conversation is taking place there is hope for narrowing the gap.

It must be recognized, however, that real conversation can never be a monologue; there must be dialogue. There must be a willingness from both sides to listen with an open, searching mind. One source of such a willingness is an acceptance by both sides of some responsibility for the gap.

The theological gap we are primarily referring to is the gap between college and seminary professors on the one hand and many pastors on the other hand. It would help all of us if we recognized that there is a comparable gap between the pulpit and the pew. And the biggest and most disturbing gap is between what we teach, preach, and profess and what we practice.

A common consciousness of sin would help to narrow the gap between the classroom and the pulpit. All of us, teachers and preachers, have sinned and come short of the glory of God. We may speak, to some degree, a different language, but we all stand in the same need of forgiveness and cleansing.

It will help to narrow the theological gap if teachers and pastors will seek to understand each other. The teacher should recognize that most pastors are extremely busy men. They should not be expected to keep up with the most recent developments in theological thought. Furthermore, they are concerned primarily with the immediate pressing needs of people. Most pastors have little interest in "fine spun" theological theories that do not, from their perspective, touch the needs of people.

On the other hand, pastors should understand that teachers live in two or more worlds. One of those worlds, largely unknown to most pastors, is the world of scholarship. It is a part of the teacher's responsibility to keep alert to the most recent developments in the area of scholarship in general but particularly in his field of specialization. In some areas there is a distinctive and highly technical vocabulary. Sometimes a gap arises because the language of the teacher is not understood or is misunderstood by others. Also, the teacher is disciplined to be exact in the use of words. This can lead to misunderstanding and mistrust.

Let us repeat that if the gap is to be bridged or even narrowed, channels of communication must be kept open. It will help to do this if teachers are invited more frequently to speak to groups of pastors. This will be particularly true if there is an opportunity provided for a dialogue. Also, more pastors should attend special ministers' weeks provided by colleges and seminaries.

The theological gap with the attendant tension can be helpful if those on both sides maintain the proper respect for one another and if meaningful communication across the gap is maintained.

"Dr. Pete" Ends Seminary
Career As Acting President

by Larry H. Panley

LOUISVILLE (BP)--Hugh R. Peterson, veteran administrator at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary here, moved up to the presidency before he moved on to retirement July 31.

Peterson served as acting president during his last day on the job, and executed his final duties from the office of President Duke K. McCall who was away on a trip.

For 31 years, "Dr. Pete" as he was called by thousands of students, served in a variety of administrative posts at the seminary. From 1958 until the day before his retirement (when he became president), he was the seminary's administrative dean.

Since joining the seminary staff in 1938, Peterson has affected the lives of some 10,000 students who now serve in ministries around the world. Most of these graduates, he can still call by name and give their present places of service.

Gifted with a remarkable memory, Peterson amazed many of the students by greeting them by name when they arrived as incoming students. It happened to this writer personally.

As student counselor and registrar, "Dr. Pete" would require each incoming student to forward a photograph of himself before arriving on campus. He would study the pictures and be able to greet the students by name when they first set foot on campus.

It happened to me when I first entered Dr. Pete's office in 1946. Twenty-two years later, in 1968, when I returned to the seminary for updating classes, he still remembered my name.

During those 22 years, I had forgotten many of the names of seminary instructors who never bothered to learn my name, but I have never forgotten Dr. Pete. He makes that kind of impression on you.

Now that he is retiring, Dr. Pete plans to do some writing for denominational publications and to serve in interim pastorates. "At the moment, my plans are very flexible," he said. "If there is nothing to do, I'll invent something."

A flexible person, a passing ship once determined the career of Hugh R. Peterson. Shipwrecked in the Pacific 350 miles north of his native New Zealand while on his way to America for theological studies in 1930, he had decided he would let the first passing ship determine whether he would continue his journey or return home. Fortunately for Southern Seminary, the first ship was headed toward America.

Dr. Pete was born in Gore, New Zealand, in 1903. He worked for a New Zealand banking firm before entering the ministry in 1926. He studied at Los Angeles Bible Institute, Georgetown College in Georgetown, Ky., and Southern Seminary where he earned bachelor, master, and doctor of theology degrees.

Upon graduating with the doctorate in 1937, he became student counselor, and later registrar, secretary of the faculties, faculty member, dean of students, director of admissions and administrative dean.

He also served for 10 years as pastor of the Sonora Baptist Church near Louisville, and has served as interim pastor in more than a score of other churches.

Peterson has had 39 secretaries over the years. The day before his retirement, he was presented with a scrapbook containing letters from 30 of them. The scrapbook, prepared by seminary Registrar Tom Sherwood, also contained tributes from current staff, faculty and students.

Foreign-born himself, Dr. Pete has been a special friend over the years to the seminary's international students. Upon his retirement, members of the International Club expressed their gratitude by presenting him with a lighted globe.

But the retirement gift Dr. Pete liked best was the chair he has occupied in his seminary office. The chair was retired with him.

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THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

By T. B. Maston

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How can the church minister most effectively to the world? It cannot do this by withdrawing from the world, which has been one of the historic strategies practiced to varying degrees by some Christian groups.

Those who have advocated the withdrawal of the church from the world have contended that this would enable it to demonstrate most completely to the world the Christian ideal for the world. They further suggest that for the church to live in the world would mean compromise with the world.

There are others who suggest that the church can and will influence the world most effectively by adjusting its message and methods to the culture in which it finds itself. They contend that an attempt should be made to update the Gospel so it will conform to the latest developments in science, philosophy, and other areas of human thought.

It is true that the church by its very nature as a human as well as a divine institution has to adapt itself to some degree to the world in which it finds itself. It must start where the world and the peoples of the world are at any particular point in time and in any particular geographic area. This it must do if it is to minister effectively to the world.

On the other hand, the church will not lift the world toward God's ideal for the world unless there is maintained a constant tension between what the church preaches, teaches, and practices and what the world believes and practices. At the same time there will tend to be a continuing tension within the church.

There may be several sources for this tension, but one will be a conflict between the church's desire to be the true church of God and its desire to be relevant to its immediate environment.

The church properly wants its message and ministry to be relevant to the world, and yet it knows that it will not minister most effectively for God to the world if it compromises with the world.

It must not accept the values of the world as its supreme values if it is to lift the world toward God. It must be more interested in its influence on the world than in its prestige in the world. It must be more concerned with the approval of God than the approval of the peoples of the world.

The church's spire is somewhat symbolic of its place in and ministry to the community and the world. That spire should remind the peoples of the world that God is at work in the world. Also it should help people to understand that God is a final point of reference not only for the church but also for the world.

The people who compose the church come into the church building to worship God and go from the building out into the world to serve the world in the name of the God they worship.

Churches may need to be reminded that they are in constant danger of being overcome by the world. They may become wealthy and respected but powerless to lift the world toward God.

A worldly church tends to use worldly methods to achieve worldly goals. It measures its success in worldly terms. When a church becomes a worldly power it tends to lose its spiritual power.

In other words, a secular church with a secular Gospel and secular goals cannot and will not make much of an impact on a secular world.