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TEACHING SCRIPTURE IN A PLURALISTIC AGE

by
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In order for us to clearly perceive the challenge of teaching Scripture in a pluralistic age, I believe we must understand what we mean by pluralistic, or pluralism. We are using the word within the context of religion; therefore, to speak of religious pluralism is to say "that, all religions are intrinsically of equal value" (Gaybba 3).

In a pluralist position, less emphasis is placed on Christ-centered theology and more emphasis is given a God-centered theology. Moreover, it is the God *who has many names* who is the focus, and not the God of Judeo-Christianity. In this view God is known in many revelations, all of them salvific in value. The Christian drama is one among several divine disclosures. Jesus is savior, but not the only savior; central, but not final; special, but not exclusive. Christianity is true, but it is not the only truth (Robbins 38).

Because of the position of religious pluralism, Christians must now seek to be more offensively, rather than defensively, minded when it comes to teaching the Bible. We have an obligation to teach our position to those around us, but at the same time, to refrain from unnecessarily offending those who do not share our faith. We should recognize, however, that some will be offended, because the Gospel, by nature, is offensive to those who do not believe (see 2 Cor. 2:15-16).

In deciding how we should approach this issue of teaching Scripture in a pluralistic age, it is important to understand precisely our position on the means of salvation. In this regard we have two basic options, exclusivism or inclusivism.

Exclusivism is the traditional response: Christ and Christ alone offers us God's

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special revelation and mediates to us divine salvation. Neither revelation nor salvation can be found outside of Christianity (Gaybba 3).

This has been the traditional view of the Christian Church. “Indeed one can argue that the exclusivist position, combined with the conviction that the claims of Christianity are true has been the driving force behind the modern missionary movement” (Netland 75). While this may be so, in recent times the exclusivist position has come under severe attack, “and is rejected by many theologians and even missionaries as naive, arrogant, bigoted and a vestige of an immoral religious imperialism” (Netland 75). This is a strong reaction to a position that the church has held for most of its existence on earth.

Inclusivism, on the other hand, offers a more tolerant approach. The position of the inclusivist is that “there may be truth in non-Christian religions insofar as they embody Christian principles and concepts” (Robbins 37). Gaybba elaborates:

Inclusivism can be divided into two broad categories: those who hold that non-Christian religions mediate some form of divine revelation but no salvation and those who believe that they can mediate both. However, all inclusivists have in common the idea that Jesus Christ alone is saviour and the norm whereby all other revelations are to be judged. Inclusivists who acknowledge the presence of salvation in other religions will see such salvation as the product of the hidden work of Jesus there, through his spirit (3).

According to this position, non-Christians who live like Christians are viewed as “anonymous Christians”; some may be Christians even though they do not know it, or may not look like Christians to others. Romans 2:14-16 is sometimes used to argue for this position. The option we choose, whether inclusive or exclusive, will greatly influence our approach to teaching Scripture in a pluralistic age.

Establishing the Foundation

As we approach the task of teaching Scripture in a pluralistic age, it becomes necessary to first establish a few facts. Two of the most critical are: *On what basis is the Bible authoritative?* and *What are our basic doctrinal beliefs?* These issues must be clearly defined before we can enter into any meaningful dialogue with our non-Christian friends, and if we are going to teach the Scripture to them effectively. Although it is not

the purpose of this paper to discuss these particular issues in depth, I believe it is necessary to make some brief comments in this regard.

We of the Judeo-Christian tradition hold that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God. We make this claim on the belief that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God. What various ones of us mean by *inspired* or *inerrant* may differ slightly, yet it is so minor that we do not divide on this issue.

We believe that the authority of the Bible rests not only in its nature as divinely inspired and inerrant, but also in the reality that it is the revelation of God. God has used the Bible to disclose who He is, salvation's plan, and all that we need to know to live a holy life on earth. However, even this is not the final word on the authority of the Bible. Inspiration, inerrancy and revelation are concerned with the inherent authority of the Bible; this, of course, is a faith-claim on the part of those who believe. Therefore, the authority of the Bible is not fully realized without the empowering of individuals by the Holy Spirit.

I am delighted to confess that the Bible is the Word of God, but I also insist, that such an affirmation of faith is a dead letter unless the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus makes the Scriptures come alive in our hearts. Having the body of Scripture without the Spirit who inspired them is to be without the Word of God (Hahn 8).

For the Spirit to work in the individual's life, some measure of faith is required. As such, one must have faith in God in order for the Bible to have authority over his/her life. It follows, then, that the Bible is authoritative for the Church, the community of believers. "Where the church is shaped by the sacred story of Scripture, the authority of the Bible is not a matter of debate" (Hahn 8).

The practical test of the Bible as the authoritative Word of God is measured by how its claims are lived out by those of us who give verbal assent to its authority over our lives. Our walk must reflect our talk. "The authority of the Bible will be lived out in the obedient life of the Church, or that authority will not exist in any meaningful way" (Hahn 8).

Next, to effectively teach Scripture in a pluralistic age, our basic doctrinal beliefs must be clearly understood and articulated. For example, what do we mean when we say we believe in one God, yet go on to say He is three persons, i.e. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? This becomes crucial especially when dealing with our Muslim neighbours who believe Allah alone is God and Jesus is merely one of the prophets, of which Mohammed is the greatest. It is also important when speaking

with our Hindu friends who believe in millions of deities, of whom Jesus is one.

Also significant as a basic doctrine is our belief about the nature of humankind. We believe that humankind is corrupted by sin and is not capable of any good, unless enabled by God's Holy Spirit; therefore, salvation through Jesus Christ is necessary. The importance of such a stance becomes apparent in one regard when we note that some of our non-Christian friends, due to their conviction that matter is evil and spirit is good, believe that what is done in the body is of no consequence. Thus, the pursuit of life is to attain spiritual oneness with the pure spiritual one (nirvana), thereby attaining freedom from matter. However, for the Christian what is done in the body is of immense importance for God created both the material and the spiritual.

Our definition of sin also needs articulation. Is every wrong a person does an act of sin, even if it originates from misunderstanding or physical limitation? Or is sin a deliberate transgression of a known law of God? Can a person sin unknowingly? Again, this is a crucial point when dealing with Muslims and Hindus in our society, as well as with adherents to the New Age movement. These religious groups do not even use the term "sin." For some of them, killing another person, stealing, lying or adultery is not wrong if it can be justified. We must be able to show clearly how the claims of the Christian faith as found in Scripture are decisively different from the claims of other religions.

Equally important is that we clearly state our position on final judgement and life after death, including the reality of heaven and hell. Concepts such as heaven and hell are familiar terms to us in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but not to many of our non-Christian friends.

It is of vital importance that we as evangelical Christians clearly articulate our position on these issues of biblical authority and basic doctrine before we attempt to teach Scripture in this pluralistic age.

Utilizing the Hermeneutical Process

Vital to the effective teaching of Scripture in this pluralistic age is the hermeneutical process. By this I mean the way we go about arriving at, and applying, the truths of Scripture. Suffice it to say that we believe each book of the Bible was written in a particular period of history, in a particular context, to a particular audience, by a particular writer. But these qualifications do not limit the principles of truth that are in the Bible; biblical principles are timeless. The hermeneutical task is to work through the limitations, ascertain the principles of truth, and then teach these principles to our non-Christian friends.

One of the most helpful books I have found in this regard is *The Hermeneutical Spiral* by Grant R. Osborne. Osborne is very lucid and thorough in describing the process. He notes three perspectives that are critical to understanding the hermeneutical process:

First, hermeneutics is a science, since it provides a logical, orderly classification of the laws of interpretation . . . Second, hermeneutics is an art, for it is an acquired skill demanding both imagination and an ability to apply the “laws” to selected passages or books . . . Third and most important, hermeneutics when utilized to interpret Scripture is a spiritual act, depending upon the leading of the Holy Spirit (5).

We must grasp the science and the art of the hermeneutical process so that we may rightly explain the Word of truth (2 Tim 2:35, NRSV). This process lacks meaning in the context of the Kingdom of God unless it is done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, it will be the work of mere sinful humankind, and will certainly fail to convince our non-Christian friends.

Osborne reminds us that the hermeneutical enterprise has three levels:

We begin with a third-person approach, asking “what *it meant*” (exegesis), then passing to the first-person approach querying “what it means for *me*” (devotional), and finally taking a second-person approach, seeking “how to share with *you* what it means to me” (sermonic) [pedagogic] (6).

The process requires that, prior to attempting to teach Scripture, we have an understanding of the cultural background of the text: *Who was the original audience? What was the issue being addressed? Who was the writer? What language was used?* In the final analysis, “the task of interpreters of the Bible is to find out the meaning of a statement (command or question) for the author and for the first hearers or readers, and thereupon to transmit that meaning to modern readers” (Mickelsen 5). When we do hermeneutics correctly, we will arrive at theology, those principles of truth which are within a given text. It is these principles we then preach and teach today. Hahn states:

The Bible was written by the community of faith and for the community of faith. It met needs in the community of faith. The foundational question I always ask a text is, “What was this passage doing in and for Israel or the church?” Having answered the question, I almost always can discover applications [principles of truth] of the same function for today’s people of God (9).

I believe this is the one area in which we as evangelical Christians are the most vulnerable. Because we do not always adequately apply ourselves to the hermeneutical task, we often display uncertainty in articulating our position as truth. However, it is our task as the Church to interpret the Bible both for ourselves and for those who do not share our faith.

Proper hermeneutics will likewise help us deal with the confusion of terminology. Other religious groups, most notably the New Age Movement, use a number of words which Christians use to describe religious experience, e.g. salvation, grace, redemption, Saviour, God, etc. Sound hermeneutics leads us to a clarity of terms, even in the face of imitations and facsimiles. Therefore, the use of sound hermeneutical principles is essential for the effective transmission of the truth of Scripture today.

Understanding the Religious Context

Effectively teaching Scripture in a pluralistic age, while refraining from unnecessarily offending others, requires that we have a basic understanding of the religious beliefs of our non-Christian friends. By this I do not suggest that we know something about every other religion, rather that we know something about the major religions within our given contexts. In some cases this may be Hinduism; in others, it may be Orishas; in yet another, Islam may be prevalent. Whatever religious beliefs we may come up against in our given setting, some understanding of those beliefs on our part is necessary, before we can effectively present the message of the Bible.

For example, if Muslims are common within our area of influence, we should know about the Six Articles of Faith, as well as the five religious duties. We should acquaint ourselves with teachings about the prophet Muhammad, as well as the Islamic concepts of salvation, sin and eternal life.

Likewise, we should know what our Hindu friends mean when they talk about reincarnation or rebirth, as well as what they mean by *karma*. Braden reveals that in its most basic form, karma refers to the law of sowing and reaping (95). One's karma determines what form of rebirth one will have, whether a higher or lower form of life. The ideal is to manage such a controlled life that one eventually breaks free from the cycle of reincarnation. The goal is thus to experience *Nirvana*, becoming one with the eternal spirit.

In Hinduism, the "law of deeds" [karma] results in repeated reincarnations to lower or higher social status, but can be

overcome by abstaining from all efforts and desires and thus entering the state of impersonality [Nirvana]" (Heydt 82-83).

It is also important to understand that for the Hindu, the focus of their relationship with the deities is one of continual efforts of appeasement. A deity who loves humanity is a foreign concept. The Hindu believes that the more one is able to please a deity, the more likely that deity is to act in one's favour. This effort of appeasement and the resulting fear of the deities is characteristic of all animistic religions. In fact, Seaman observes that fear is the dominant moving force in animistic religions:

The animist lives in constant fear. He is surrounded by evil spirits who are constantly out to "get him." All his energy is expended in the effort to appease or manipulate these spirits (190).

Regardless of particular religious expressions throughout the Caribbean, it is safe to say that we should all be especially aware of the features and expressions of animism. This is so because animism is at the center of both our Eastern and our African heritages. Therefore, we must be cognizant of five underlying principles:

a. *The holistic view of life.* The animist does not fragment or departmentalize life . . . Everything is interconnected so that every activity from birth to death—and beyond—is interpreted as belonging to a religious whole.

b. *The spiritual view of life.* The animist lives in close relationship with a world which he believes is inhabited and dominated by an infinite variety of spiritual beings. To him the spiritual forces are primary. Thus in every happening he looks not for the normal relation of cause and effect, but for the spiritual forces that control the outcome . . .

c. *The mythical view of life.* By means of myths all the great moments of life and death are given interpretation and meaningful expression . . . All the fundamental beliefs are set out in mythical forms.

d. *The ritualistic expression of life.* Great importance is given in tribal societies to the observance of rituals . . . For all . . . seasons and events, rituals have been developed and are carefully observed . . .

e. *The cyclic view of time.* . . . For [the animist] time is a cyclic and not a linear process . . . The past is important because it provides the way of response in the present; the future is unimportant

because it is nonexistent; the present is all important (Seamands 186-187).

We should also have some basic understanding of the major characteristics of animism, such as the following:

a. *Hierarchy of spiritual beings.* To the animist the spirit world is very real. He believes in a variety of spirits, all the way from the spirits that inhabit the stones and trees to the Great Spirit of the sky.

b. *Prevalence of spiritual power (mana).* All animistic societies recognize the existence of an impersonal, mysterious life force which pervades everything . . .

c. *The shaman and magic.* The belief in spirits and spiritual forces leads to the development of magic and the religious expert, in order to appease or control the vast array of spirits, and to gain or manipulate mana. The shaman, or religious specialist, is an important and powerful personage in animistic society.

d. *The observance of taboo.* Where a belief in magic and mana exists, utmost caution will be used in securing protection from invisible attacks of one's enemies. This gives rise to the common practice of taboo (Seamands 187-189).

Most of us will encounter non-Christian friends who have an animistic background. The more we understand of their basic religious philosophy and worldview, even if they themselves do not fully comprehend it, the greater opportunity we will have to effectively impart the truth of Scripture to them.

Practical Suggestions

Let us now look at some practical suggestions.

1. I suggest that we look for points of commonality. For example, Islam means "submission" and a Muslim is one who submits to the will of Allah. The Christian is one who submits as well: "Not my will but thy will be done" (Luke 22:42). Muslims believe in one supreme personal God; so do Christians. The Islamic faith uses many terms which are familiar to us: God, apostles, witness, sovereign, etc. They also practice fasting and almsgiving. We can use these points of commonality as means of opening communication for teaching Scripture.

The animistic belief in spirit possession is a point of contact for teaching about the work of the Holy Spirit. The Hindu belief in Karma,

“the law of sowing and reaping,” is also a point of contact, for the Bible teaches the same law in Galatians 6:7.

Points of contact are crucial, for only as we take time to study the assumptions and presuppositions of our non-Christian friends, will we be effective in teaching Scripture without unnecessarily offending them.

2. We must demonstrate true love and acceptance. No matter the cost, we must love these people. “The central point is that love illuminates in a way mere concepts never can do” (Gaybba 9). Our non-Christian friends must never be made to feel second-class, or feel rejected because of their religious beliefs. Genuine love is our strongest means of convincing them, since most other religions lack this basis.

Our own theological understanding of the nature and possibilities of humankind is a major strength when approaching others. People everywhere are fundamentally alike. Respect for others simply because they are human beings created in the image of God, and love for others because they are loved by our Father in heaven, are indispensable truths for the Christian to embody in an atmosphere of religious pluralism.

3. Points of contrast are also important. In contrast to the evil spirits that molest and destroy, there is a caring heavenly Father who loves us unconditionally. We do not have to appease Him in order to gain His love and care. The concept of karma in Hinduism, which demands that a person reap what is sown, may be contrasted with the forgiving God of the Christian faith who frees us from the past if only we repent.

A word of caution for using contrast is necessary. The idea is not to accentuate the negatives in the other person’s religious beliefs. Rather, it is to present the truth of Scripture in a positive manner and let the nonbelievers make the comparisons themselves.

4. We must recognize the need for genuine dialogue. We earn the right to teach Scripture if we engage in genuine dialog with our non-Christian friends. Genuine dialogue includes honestly listening to them.

We have the responsibility to listen to those who differ and to avoid even the appearance of cultural imperialism . . . genuine dialog does not mean accepting any claim another person makes. Nor does it mean suspending one’s own beliefs as a precondition for discussion. But it does involve listening and speaking honestly (Clark & Geisler 201).

We show disrespect for our non-Christian friends when we are not open to genuine dialogue.

5. Our lives are usually the most powerful teaching tool. If what we teach is not seen in how we live, all our attempts to convince without

unnecessarily offending our non-Christian friends would have failed. We must strive everyday to live the teachings of the Scripture. Non-Christians in this pluralistic age must be convinced that the Bible is indeed the authoritative Word of God, and the God of the Bible is quite capable of transforming the life of anyone who will submit to His Word. Our transformed lives are the most compelling proof they will have.

Dr. E. Stanley Jones said that India's attack on the gospel has gone through three stages. First the people said, "It isn't *true*." Then they began to say, "It isn't *new*. What you have in Christianity we also have in essence in our religion." Today they say, "It isn't *you*." That is, "You Christians profess one thing but practice another." And this, we must confess, is the most serious attack of all (Seamands 109).

6. The task does not rest completely on our shoulders. We must never forget that teaching Scripture in a pluralistic age is ultimately grounded in the power of God. Yes, we must do our part, and be able to clearly articulate the message of Scripture. But we must always remember that our task is to be done with total reliance upon the One who has commanded us to go and teach His Word to all nations. In the final analysis, it is He who brings all persons to the point of acceptance. Therefore, we must approach this task of teaching Scripture in a pluralistic age with much prayer and reliance upon the power of God to make our work effective.

Conclusion

The task laid out before us is no easy one. But I am convinced that if we seriously apply ourselves to the task of teaching Scripture in a pluralistic age, we can convince many of our non-Christian friends of the validity and authority of Scripture, which will eventually lead to their conversion to Christianity. The task may seem daunting in light of the many religious expressions in our society. But remember: It is God who wants to work through us to accomplish His purpose, not vice versa. Thanks be to God for His grace which enables each of us to do His will.

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