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When Scholarship Goes South: Biblical Scholarship and Global Trends

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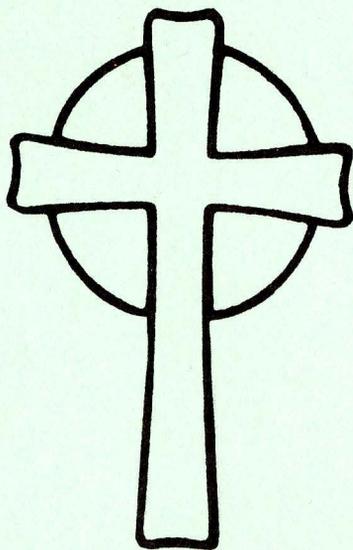
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- 65 When Scholarship Goes South:
Biblical Scholarship and Global
Trends
EVERTT W. HUFFARD
- 73 Silence of Scripture in Reformation
Thought
JACK P. LEWIS
- 91 What the Spirit Says to the Churches:
A Critical Evaluation of Certain
Liberationist Hermeneutics
NATHAN SEGARS
- 103 Twenty Years of Teaching a Bible
Study in a Long-term Care Facility
CLAUDE COX
- 113 Book Reviews and Notes



WHEN SCHOLARSHIP GOES SOUTH: BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP AND GLOBAL TRENDS

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As Europe and North America complete their transition into a post-Christian era, Africa and South America enter a Christian era. In the summer of 1989, Larry Stephens and I were searching for a seminary west of Nairobi when we came upon an enormous building project. We stopped a priest walking along the side of the road and asked what was being built. His reply: "The next Vatican." I was in Rome in May of 2005 and the shift in the clergy was obvious. Most of the clergy on the streets were African or South American. Very few Italian priests are ordained each year, but 5,000 priests are currently in training in Nigeria.

The largest churches in the world are in Korea, Brazil and Nigeria. Per annum growth trends are declining in the global north. Christian groups experienced less than 1% per annum growth in North America compared to 2.4% in Africa and 2.6% in Asia.¹ The contrast between growth rates of Christianity in North America and Africa points to a major change in the global face of Christianity. African Christians are increasing at the rate of 23,000 a day (8.5 million a year) while Europe and North America lose an estimated 6,000 church members a day.² The Churches of Christ have more congregations in Africa than in the USA. From 1989 to 2000 the number of congregations doubled from six to twelve thousand, at a time the missionary force decreased.³

E. H. Carr, in the Trevelyan Lectures at Cambridge in 1961, may have been the first to claim that "the world center of gravity has definitely shifted from Western Europe," but at the time he was not really sure to where it would move.⁴

¹ David B. Barrett, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing, "Missiometrics 2005: A Global Survey of World Missions," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29.1 (Jan. 2005): 29.

² Jehu J. Hanciles, "Migration and Mission: Some Implications for the Twenty-first-Century Church," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 27.4 (Oct. 2003): 149.

³ Wendell Broom Sr., "Reflections on the Twentieth Century in African Missions," in *One Hundred Years of African Missions* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2001), 34, 364.

⁴ Gerald J. Pillay, "The Challenges of Teaching Church History from a Global

Philip Jenkins, professor at Penn State, raised the awareness of the global shift in *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Influenced in part by the data published by David Barrett and Andrew Walls,⁵ he predicts that by the year 2050, 20% of the three billion Christians in the world will be non-Hispanic Caucasian.⁶ In the Heritage Foundation Lectures in October 2004, he made the observation that there were more Roman Catholic baptisms in the Philippines in 2003 than in France, Spain, Italy, and Poland combined. Six countries in the world will have 100 million Christians in 2050; only one will be in the industrialized West (USA). In 1800, one percent of all Protestants lived outside Europe and America; today 66% do so.⁷

Identifying the Shifts

Political, linguistic, economic, and technological forces manipulate these global shifts. The earliest spread of Christianity began with the migration of Christians who “preached the word wherever they went” (Acts 8:4). Jehu Hanciles (a Sierra Leonean associate professor of Mission History and Globalization at Fuller Theological Seminary) traces the global influence of Christianity in terms of migrations. Much later, migration became a major factor in the emergence of the Islamic Age from 750-1750. Christianity emerged again as a dominant religious force in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through migration. Between 1815 and 1915, over 50 million Europeans emigrated overseas.⁸

If the future of the “next Christendom” depends on migration, the migration of Muslims North and West may overwhelm the advancement of Christianity if it were not for the fact that Christians are also migrating in equally significant numbers from Africa and impacting the North and West. There are 3,000 African immigrant churches in Britain and over 3 million African Christians in Europe. Churches of Christ in Italy and England experience more growth among the immigrants than among their own nationals. Our congregation in Memphis has helped plant a church among Liberian immigrants in Providence, Rhode Island over the past ten years. Christianity is a migratory religion and unlike Judaism, Hinduism and Islam, it has not been enslaved to one geographical, ethnic, or cultural center.

Perspective,” in *Enlarging the Story: Perspectives on Writing World Christian History* (ed. Wilbert R. Shenk; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 79.

⁵ David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia* (2d ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

⁶ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 11.

⁷ Jenkins, 37.

⁸ Hanciles, 146.

David J. Bosch traced the shifts of the center of gravity in terms of the changing mission paradigms reflected in the language of the church. The first shift was from Hebrew to Greek. The Hellenization of the church, influenced more by the Johannine tradition than Pauline, viewed the church as a bearer of culture. But by the fifth century orthodoxy became ingrown and nationalistic, with little concern for the outsider.⁹ The Roman Catholic paradigm brought a shift from Greek to Latin, with more anthropological than theological priorities. The emerging dualistic worldview focused on salvation as a private matter, and Luke 14:23 would best represent their mission text—"Compel them to come in."¹⁰ Then the Protestant paradigm brought a shift from Latin to German and on to the other European languages, with English the ultimate victor.¹¹

Few factors bring more rapid and pervasive change into our world than the world wide web. Stevan Harnad, in "Post-Gutenberg Galaxy," identifies four revolutions: the advent of the first language, the first writing, the printing press and now the web.¹² Thomas Friedman, in *The World Is Flat*, analyzes the shift in terms of three phases of globalization: Globalization 1.0 (1492–1800) was a time when governments led change and the world went from large to medium. This was the era when the kings of Spain and Portugal were commissioned by the pope to evangelize the world. With Globalization 2.0 (1800–2000), the multinational corporations led change to produce a real global economy. The world went from medium to small. When Bill Clinton was elected president in 1992, only the government and the academy had email. Globalization 3.0 has just begun and the world is going from small to tiny.¹³ For Harnad, *multiple reciprocal email*, which he calls "scholarly skywriting," will revolutionize scholarship by giving research libraries, scholarly societies, and scholars control over their information rather than publishers.¹⁴ It will completely globalize the scholarly community. We will know the earth is flat when this happens!

Implications for Scholarship

1. Globalize the audience of our scholarship

In a presidential address to SNTS in Barcelona in August 2004, Wayne Meeks gave a candid assessment of NT scholarship and global trends. He

⁹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 188–212.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 214–30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 349. For a critique of his paradigms, see Alan Kreider, "Beyond Bosch: The Early Church and the Christendom Shift," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29.2 (April 2005): 59–68.

¹² Stevan Harnad, "Post-Gutenberg Galaxy: The Fourth Revolution in the Means of Production of Knowledge," *Public-Access Computer Systems Review* 2.1 (1991): 39–53.

¹³ Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), 9–10.

¹⁴ Harnad, 46.

recognized that the foundation of NT scholarship (history, exegesis of the text and audience) has changed, or as he stated it, the “three pillars of our self-confidence have crumbled.”¹⁵

As a result we find ourselves today approaching a state of complete isolation: within the university, lonely practitioners of a quaintly antiquated craft; in the larger world, distant voices scarcely heard within communities of faith and, in the noisy public realm informed by global corporate media, not noticed at all except when we say something truly outrageous.¹⁶

Post Christendom will pose a whole new challenge for biblical scholarship. The churches that are growing numerically in the USA have a public respect for the Bible but less appreciation for scholarship. Their focus has shifted from reformation of Christendom to transformation of the lost. In a similar way, Meeks called scholars to recognize the new audience—the world that a Christian minority lives next door to and are challenged by daily. One of these days the language requirements for a PhD in NT may replace French and German with a language from Africa, Asia or the Middle East.

The confrontation and conflict with pluralism will take center stage in Christian scholarship this century and may rapidly replace the challenge of secular liberalism of the past two centuries. For example, Jenkins’ prognosis for future peace between Christians and Muslims is not good. The competition for power and control in both the northern and southern hemispheres will grow stronger; we can see the signs of this today in Nigeria, Indonesia, Sudan, and the Philippines. Intolerance and persecution, currently, has been on the Islamic side.¹⁷ Islam and Hinduism grow at the rate of 1.93% and 1.49% per annum respectively, while Christianity grows at 1.31 % per annum.¹⁸ The difference in the rate of growth is explained by biological growth in Asia and Africa. Christianity actually grows three times the rate of Islam by conversion growth. The areas of least growth globally are the nonreligious (.17 % pa) and atheists (.58% pa), stats that could lend further support for a post-modern trend.

Christians of the global south will have much more conflict with the adherents of world religions and find little help from our scholarship. Early signs of this conflict might be the extended debate between M. M. Thomas (1916–96) and Lesslie Newbiggin (1909–98) in India over the nature of “churchless Christianity.”¹⁹ For the Hindu, baptism is “a sign of proselytism into a socio-

¹⁵ Wayne A. Meeks, “Why Study the New Testament?” *New Testament Studies* 51.2 (April 2005): 159.

¹⁶ Meeks, 163.

¹⁷ Jenkins, 171. Samuel P. Huntington, in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966), expected a much different future, with Islam supplanting Christianity.

¹⁸ Barrett, Johnson, and Crossing, 29.

¹⁹ Timothy C. Tennant, “The Challenge of Churchless Christianity: An Evangelical Assessment,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29.4 (2005): 171–77. See

political community involving rejection of their socio-political religious communities," but this is not the perspective that any of our commentaries on Romans might address.

2. Equip the church to be a witness to the nations

As Christianity in the global south (Africa, Latin America, Asia) emerges as a potent force in the twenty-first century, a whole new set of challenges and opportunities will call for a new ministry of study.²⁰ If the Muslim world becomes more homogeneous (ethnic cleansing of Christians from Egypt, Iraq, and Turkey) and Europe becomes more pluralistic, it might force the emergence of a new Christendom driven by the fears of the first one.²¹ While some question Jenkins' thesis that there will be another Christendom like Medieval Europe, C. Rene Padilla (Publications Secretary for the Latin American Theological Fraternity in Buenos Aires, Argentina) anticipates an even greater clash between two models of Christendom.²² For him, the worst case scenario is a clash between a Roman Catholic and an evangelical-Protestant Christendom in Latin America.

The alternative is not an elitist Christianity designed for a thinking minority but a Christianity that seeks to be faithful to Jesus Christ and to the Gospel as "Good News to the poor," at whatever cost. Such faithfulness is possible only if there is a Christology that looks at Jesus Christ from a Trinitarian perspective, recovers all events of redemption in him, including his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and places him at the very center of the life and mission of the church as the Lord of the totality of human life and history.²³

Scholarship tends to follow the interests of the scholar. If the missiological call for incarnational ministry applies to scholarship, then several things will have to happen. The first, and possibly most difficult, is the openness to those who are more conservative than many scholars have become. Since Christians in the global south are less likely to explain away prophetic utterances, dreams, miracles, and demonic manifestations, Jenkins suggests that the twenty-first century will be a very religious and a very Christian century. The Christians of

also George R. Hunsberger, "Conversion and Community: Revisiting the Lesslie Newbigin-M. M. Thomas Debate," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 22 (1998): 112-17.

²⁰ Thomas C. Langham, book review of Jenkins' *The Next Christendom*, in *Sociology of Religion* 65.1 (Spring 2004): 95-97.

²¹ David Martin, "Living in Interesting Times," *First Things* 124 (June-July 2002): 63, raises the question of the impact of the estimated 70 million economic migrants expected in Europe, most Muslim, that will raise the Muslim minority from one percent to twelve percent.

²² C. Rene Padilla, "The Future of Christianity in Latin America: Missiological Perspectives and Challenges," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23 (1999): 105-11.

²³ Padilla, 110.

the global south will also be more conservative (accept the Bible literally) and traditional than those in the West.²⁴

For the foreseeable future, the characteristic religious forms of Southern Christianity, enthusiastic and spontaneous, fundamentalist and supernatural-oriented, look massively different from those of the older centers in Europe and North America. This difference becomes critically important in light of current demographic trends. In the coming decades, the religious life characteristic of those regions may well become the Christian norm.²⁵

3. Make scholarship accessible—share resources

Good biblical scholarship is expensive. It is a precious trust for the church that is often misunderstood or under-appreciated. The ministry of study is as valuable as missions, campus, or youth ministry. Most Christians in the global south are poor, but most scholarship is dominated by the west. By far the largest factor of global change annually over the last century has been the increase in poverty. Two-thirds of the world's migrants (an estimated 97 million) are in Africa.²⁶ The number of urban poor increased from 100 million in 1900 to a current estimate of 1.63 billion.²⁷

How will the resources be shared? Western scholarship is dominated by the privileged few, the elite, a luxury in a sense; while global Christians are poor, without access to scholarship. [In some ways, they are where the Churches of Christ in the USA were in the 1950s.] Modernity served scholars better than it served churches. Globalization may better serve the lay leaders than the specialists.

Implications for the Descendants of the Restoration Movement

This global shift will be extremely tough on our own scholars because it calls us to serve the very portion of our own fellowship that we have grown distant from—the poor and the conservative literalists (patternists)—as well as the added challenge of direct political and theological confrontation with Islam, Hinduism and animism. Many may find their training did not prepare them adequately for this, nor is the church adequately prepared for the global shift. On the other hand, if we shift our academic mission to serve Christians globally, we will be blessed with a better understanding of the poor of the world and may open up the possibility for more ethnic diversity at home.

²⁴ Jenkins, 7–8. Timothy Palmer, in a review of *The Next Christendom* in *CTJ* 38 (April 2003): 173–75, questions how the generalization of a conservative South fits with the response to a prosperity gospel, widespread syncretism, and liberation theology in global south Christianity.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁶ Hanciles, 146.

²⁷ Barrett, Johnson, and Crossing, 29.

The effectiveness of our movement will continue to be judged by our faithfulness to the Word. As the world has changed, this will necessitate a greater focus on God and the Trinity. I long for the day when Christian apologetics will be viewed as the search for the oneness of God rather than proofs for His existence (biblical vs. philosophical approach).

We need to expand our framework to recognize that the “typical” member of the Church of Christ does not look like me—because he/she is from India or Nigeria. This could change a lot of sermons and publications. How, for example, would articles in *Restoration Quarterly* resonate with our brothers in Africa, Asia and Latin America? The story of E. H. Ijams on the challenges of poverty to the North American Church and one on the challenges of poverty would be very helpful.²⁸ However, I feel sure the article on ministerial compensation would not curb migration to the USA.²⁹ In James Thompson’s review of fifty years of scholarship, he noted the progress in the first generation of scholars in Greek grammar, textual criticism, apocrypha and pseudepigrapha and none in exegesis, theology, history and missiology. He raised the question of what we mean by scholarship in the Churches of Christ and asked how our scholarship engages the life of the church.³⁰ One answer comes from the reality of our changing world and the southern shift of Christianity—the academy sets standards and provides tools for scholarship, but who raises the questions? To engage in scholarship with an agenda set from outside the church could explain why some church leaders continue to view scholarship with suspicion. However, to address the real struggles of the church (leadership, mission, theology, unity, and spiritual transformation) will increase the demand for more scholarship.

As scholars find themselves to the left of most of the church, they may need to reflect constantly on the expediency principle that gave Paul the ability to serve churches living in tension between the legalistic Jewish believers and the pagan Greek believers. This also calls for greater appreciation for the scholarship that brings out the themes of great interest to the Christians in Africa and Asia, such as honor, shame, and spiritual powers. A monocultural scholar using the best historical critical methodology could still miss the point. The anthropological insights scholars such as Bruce Malina bring to the study of the Bible have met with some resistance. Other helpful examples could be found in the work of Neyrey and deSilva.³¹ John Parratt, in *Reinventing Christianity: African*

²⁸ Harold Shank, “Real Religion—The Ministry of E. H. Ijams,” *ResQ* 47.4 (2005): 221–36. Michael Landon, “The Challenges of Poverty to the North American Church,” *ResQ* 47.2 (2005): 105–15.

²⁹ Malcolm Coco, Tim Coburn, and Charles Sibert, “Ministerial Compensation among Churches of Christ in the United States,” *ResQ* 46.1 (2004): 29–50.

³⁰ James W. Thompson, “Reflections on the Last Fifty Years,” *ResQ* 46 (2004): 131–38.

³¹ Jerome Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998); David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking*

Theology Today, will introduce us to African issues. African theologians conclude that Western theologians are "unable to deal from the inside with the problems of the oppressed and the poor." The leading concerns of African theologians are culture, humanity, poverty, and oppression.³² These are also serious urban issues that suburban scholars might find irrelevant. Books will not be published on these issues because the intended audience could not afford to buy the books and the existing audience would not have an interest in them.

The office of teacher was eclipsed by the bishops of the third-century church. It is possible that scholars today are being eclipsed by popular preachers and leaders of megachurches. Tomorrow they will be eclipsed by African leaders. Without any effort to bridge and influence the church and church leaders, we could become the scribes and Pharisees with whom Jesus lost patience.

From my perspective, the fraternity of biblical scholars in the Churches of Christ lacks the closeness and intentionality that I see in other disciplines (as in counseling, missions, homiletics, and Restoration theology groups). I would encourage you to develop a stronger network and keep the biblical roots strong. As a group, keep our fellowship engaged in the text so that the Word will always dwell in us richly and your scholarship will be a blessing to Christians globally.

New Testament Culture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

³² John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 196–97.