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God's Word in His Mission

Danker: God's Word in His Mission

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I

THE PRESENT IMPASSE

Like it or not—and most of them don't—Christian lay people of all denominations find themselves drawn into a struggle splitting the worldwide Christian church into two opposing camps. How much of the Bible is to be understood literally, and how much of it is properly understood to be picture language? Is the Bible to be regarded entirely as a piece of human literature subject at all points to correction by modern research? Or is it exclusively a divine creation? Must it be presupposed that when man's historical, geographical, or scientific knowledge conflicts with this book, it is always 20th-century man who is wrong? What does it mean to accept the Bible on its own terms? What does it mean to take it exactly as it is? Is the account of the creation of Adam and Eve to be taken literally? What kind of a story is the book of Jonah meant to be?

There was civil war over these same issues in many American Christian denominations in the first third of this century. The struggle had begun earlier in European churches and theological faculties. Now in the last third of the 20th century the battle is flaring anew. Many a denomination, local church, and theological faculty that thought it had disposed of the problem long ago is facing it once more today. This time the insistence on literal interpretation finds powerful allies in the form of nationalism and cultural conservatism. The forces of literalism have made a surprising comeback all along the line. The swing toward political conservatism with its concern for law and order increases

right along with a growing emphasis on the law and the letter of the Bible in the churches.

A similar division cuts across the wide reaches of mission at home and abroad. Literalists generally prefer an other-worldly emphasis in missions. They stress the verbal proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of the individual soul. Anything that smacks of a "social gospel"—i. e., the social application of Biblical truth—fills them with uneasiness, if not fervent hostility. The \$10,000 contribution of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A. to the legal defense fund for Angela Davis cost that denomination heavily in financial and emotional support among its members. Others may feel with Pope Paul VI that "the new name for mission is development" (that is, economic and social development of poor countries). "Not tracts but tractors" is what some mission supporters seem to want to distribute.

The ecumenical tides which swelled to flood stage at the World Council of Churches Third Assembly in New Delhi in 1961 and at the Second Vatican Council have long since ebbed. Conservative Christianity is on the rise. Pentecostalism, the charismatic movement, and the Jesus movement often lead people to a literalistic Bible faith. In spite of the apparent failure of Key 73 to call the American continent to Christ, conservatives point to other gains to offset that collapse, for example, the perennial success of Billy Graham crusades. Southern Baptists enjoyed a 10 percent increase in giving in 1972. The swing to conservatism is seen not only as obedience

to the jot and tittle of the Scriptures but also as a pragmatic road to statistical success for American church bodies. Return to belief in Biblical inerrancy is being widely hailed as the key to growth in membership and contributions.

But in fact, Biblical literalism and religious conservatism have not been a cure-all. In some conservative denominations (and here's the real shocker) over half the members do not believe that they are saved alone by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Three scientific surveys over the past decade have dealt with the beliefs of Lutherans in America. In every one of them the majority of Lutherans, including those in the conservative Missouri Synod, assert they expect to get to heaven by keeping the Ten Commandments. Over half likewise assert the greatest thing Jesus Christ has done for them is to set them a good example. This is the real problem in American Christianity, as it is in many other parts of the world. These surveys constitute a challenge to other American denominations, including the most conservative, to check their foundations. When the majority of Lutherans no longer believe the bed-rock teaching of the Reformation, justification by grace through faith, we Lutherans are in deep trouble.

Perhaps Key 73 failed because American Christians did not stop first at the homes of known church members to carry on essential in-house evangelism. Before the continent can be brought to Christ, the church must be brought to penitence and faith. How can church members call the unchurched to trust Jesus for full salvation if they themselves still trust in their own good works and all-around "niceness" to win acceptance by God? But moderates and liberals were wrong, too. They often did a poor job of communicating with the people. While scholars were busy writing books that were often designed to be

read only by other scholars, "the hungry sheep," in Milton's phrase, "looked up and were not fed." Pastors often found it hard to comprehend what the pundits were saying.

Theologians spoke in tongues unknown to the people. Missionaries all over the world go to great pains to address people in their own language and at their own level. Could not people of the church here have expected similar effort and concern from theologians and educators?

Theologians seem to have a genius for choosing words that do not conduct the electricity of their intended meaning. One glaring example is "myth." When scholars use the word, it means a narrative, whether historical or legendary, that communicates profound truth. When most people hear it, they assume its first dictionary meaning: "A fictitious or conjectural narrative presented as historical but without any basis of fact; hence, an imaginary or fictitious person, object, or event." "Myth" became a barrier to communication and a source of uneasiness and fear when Biblical scholars applied it to the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Missionaries to the people of New Guinea are all too familiar with the warning of anthropologist Peter Lawrence in his book *Road Belong Cargo*: "That which is spoken is not necessarily that which is heard."

Of all barriers to communication the term "historical-critical methods of Bible study" has perhaps been the most offensive. Whatever its convenience as shorthand for specialists, it conveys wrong signals to many persons. As rightly practiced with the necessary presuppositions and controls, historical-critical methods force the interpreter to stand not above the Bible but under it, taking its words exactly as they read and seeking with the best possible tools to dig out the Holy Spirit's intended literal meaning. But how does it come across to the lay

person? It sounds to him as though the interpreter is being critical of God and of His revelation. The scholars are accused of "sitting in judgment on the Bible" and of "taking away our Bible."

Moreover, if he advocates the term "historical-critical methods" the conservative Bible student in the eyes of many lay persons makes himself the bedfellow of scholars who cut themselves loose from the Biblical faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, especially in the 19th century.

II

GOD'S WORD IN CONTEXT AT THE POINT OF DELIVERY

It is more fruitful to consider the problems of Biblical interpretation within the dynamic process of world mission. Then a great many things fall into place. Today the world mission is very sensitive to the need of operating in the context of the people it is seeking to reach with the Gospel.

This gives us our cue for a better way to discuss Biblical interpretation. We have always known that we must study the Word of God in its context. The context includes the passages that come before and follow after a given text. It may include the whole book or the entire Bible. The wider context also includes the entire cultural setting in which the book was written.

We are tentatively advancing a consideration of world mission and Bible interpretation under two heads. We propose the thesis that God's mission calls for contextualization, putting God's eternal revelation in the prevailing cultural context so that His saving will may be communicated. The same dynamic is at work in both mission and interpretation. We could therefore speak of

- A. Contextualization at the Point of Delivery, and
- B. Contextualization at the Point of Origin.

If we fail to study the context, we run the risk of misunderstanding God's

inspired Word. We may miss saving truths which nourish God's people. Studying the Bible and missions together can help us understand both of them better. When God sent His Son as His great Missionary to our planet, He put Him right in the middle of a very specific context: first-century Palestinian culture. The inspired first-century Biblical writers listened to the conversation of the people around them, observed their customs closely, and some of them even searched the books, letters, and recorded speeches of their contemporaries to find words and expressions that would help people understand that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing they might have life in His name. The object of good Bible study is to understand the original context so well that we know clearly what God's Word meant then and there. And then the missionary in both the western and the nonwestern world seeks to understand people's cultural and social context today so well that he can explain clearly what God's Word means to his audience here and now. Let us see how this works.

God puts His message into our human context. To bring His Word to human beings He makes it human. He takes our context, our nature, our setting and surroundings into consideration. "The Word was made flesh."

All who are saved are saved by the work of Jesus Christ. But that salvation dare not be presented in exactly the same way to all people. Paul, the prince of missionaries, forcefully outlines his policy of adapting himself to the context of the people whom he sets out to evangelize.

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the Law I became as one under the Law—though not being myself under the Law—that I might win

those under the Law. To those outside the Law I became as one outside the Law—not being without Law toward God but under the Law of Christ—that I might win those outside the Law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Cor. 9:19-23)

Paul is not frozen to traditional forms in his words and actions. Instead, he is intent on function. While he knows what lies behind, his eyes are fixed on the goal: "that I might by all means save some." Laymen will be quick to see in Paul a model for executives who practice management by objectives.

His goal orientation allows him freedom to negotiate many items. But the same locking in on the target makes one thing completely non-negotiable:

For I am not ashamed of the Gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." (Rom. 1:16-17)

How does one put God's Word in context in his mission? First, one recognizes that every human language has a different cultural context. Missionaries have always known that translating the Bible means transposing it from one life-style into another. Eugene A. Nida, the American Bible Society's secretary for versions, reports one example in *Bible Translating* (New York: American Bible Society, 1947), pp. 136-317:

Among the people of the Ponape Islands near Truk there was no word for "father" when the missionaries first came. The people possessed a type of communal marriage, so that no one was able to identify the father of a child. Since these people had no cultural feature of "fatherhood" in the sense of the family unit, they had no word for

"father." They did have a word for "guardian," for at a certain time in the child's life a particular man would take over the custody of the child; that is to say, he would stand responsible for the care of the child. The only word which could be used by the translators for "father" was this word for "guardian." If a foreign word for "father" had been used, it could only have been explained in terms of this word "guardian," for both the biological and social aspects of the word "father" are significant.

Over the centuries the cultural setting of western Christian peoples has changed. That has called forth many new translations in the last century. But these often meet with resistance from people who cannot understand that changing times require us to put the Bible into changed contexts. When the New Testament was first translated from the ancient *koine* Greek of the first centuries of the Christian era into modern Greek, riots broke out in Greece, and copies of the new translation were burned in public. When the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament first appeared, similar incidents occurred.

Missionaries today are following the lead of St. Paul in establishing indigenous, contextualized churches around the world. Paul did not force Gentile Christians to be circumcised before baptism, nor to abstain from pork, even though the only written Scriptures available at that time, the Old Testament, clearly commanded these things. Paul knew that the letter would kill the infant church; only the Spirit and Spirit-guided adaptation could make it live. No doubt the legalistic Jews of his time pointed to their successful mission work that brought in countless proselytes. Surely, they must have tempted him with short-range success as they sought to explain why "conservative synagogues grow faster." But because Paul insisted on his Spirit-guided freedom to adapt God's message to a new context, there is today a worldwide

Christian Church, the first universal religion in human history. He exhorted his wavering troops in Galatia, "For freedom Christ has set us free: Stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

Today Christian missionaries are adapting to many local customs. Conservative Christian leaders, including those at the School of World Missions at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, Calif., are saying that an African polygamist need not put away all but one of his wives before he can be baptized. While not permitting the baptized Christian to relapse into polygamy, they point out that the New Testament merely says that the polygamist convert cannot be a pastor or elder.

How decide whether a given belief or practice is an allowable cultural difference, or whether it must be rejected? Space limitations do not allow an answer to this question in all its aspects. But Paul's first and chief question would certainly have been, "How does it affect the goal of the mission, 'that I might by all means save some'?" For the sake of the goal he puts the Gospel in context at the point of delivery in mission.

III

GOD'S WORD IN CONTEXT AT THE POINT OF ORIGIN

Many problems will solve themselves as Christian people get their contexts of world mission and Bible interpretation together. For the Bible is nothing but the record of God's great mission to His world. He operates with the same adaptation and flexibility in *giving* His Word as He did in giving it *out* through His missionary Paul. "God spoke at sundry times and in diverse manners." He suited himself to the surroundings and to the channels through which He spoke.

If, therefore, we wish to understand Him, we must do our utmost to study the setting in which His Word origi-

nates. Language, culture, history, literary customs and forms all belong to the wider context of the inspired Scriptures. Breakthroughs have been made in the understanding of the languages of the peoples surrounding Israel. We have a better understanding of the literary customs and conventions of Biblical times.

For this reason, serious Bible students place much emphasis on archaeology. Biblical scholars have toiled for weeks and months and years under the hot Palestinian sun in archaeological digs searching for more light on God's Word.

We live in a favored time, also because we have better texts to work with than the Reformers and their successors of the 17th century. A half million additional pertinent manuscripts of fragments have turned up in the past two centuries. The caves of Qumran have yielded Old Testament texts a thousand years older than any we previously possessed.

Since dogma is determined by Scripture, rather than the other way around, we dare not let dogmatists put a straight jacket on what Biblical scholars are allowed to discover. On the other hand, it is encouraging to see the fruitful and constructive results of conversations between Biblical interpreters and dogmatists. If there is a difference between our traditional opinion and the clear understanding of the Bible in the light of the best available evidence, the Christian who has vowed to let the inspired Scriptures be the source and standard for Christian faith and life knows clearly which path he must take.

The Old Testament speaks of the sun rotating around the earth, of unicorns, and of the four corners of the earth because these expressions reflected the world picture which people then had in their minds. What matters for us is not the knowledge of science but the knowledge of God and His salvation which the Scriptures convey.

If God has used contemporary human understanding in a given passage, or if He intended to express himself in a picture or a parable, it is not a mark of Christian faith to insist that the true meaning must be found in a surface reading of the words. It may be merely evidence of inadequate Bible study. The true meaning is the meaning that God's Spirit intended us to get.

The preoccupation with geographical, historical, and scientific minutiae in the name of a misunderstood inerrancy can lead to an impoverishment of Biblical understanding.

At a pastoral conference in the South one minister observed, "Many of our people believe that faith is a good work earning the favor of God instead of His grace grasping us and making us His own. The more incredible things they believe the more merit badges they think they earn before God. Therefore, they actually seek to maximize the number of miracles even beyond those that a thorough understanding of the Biblical text places before us. They also look down on those who believe a lesser number of miracles than they themselves do."

Others are concerned about a domino theory of Biblical interpretation which it is feared will finally destroy faith in the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith. It is true, some scientific Biblical interpreters have made shipwreck of their Christian faith. But those who effectively opposed them were not the fundamentalistic literalists but those who used the newer methods and the later knowledge on the basis of a commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Besides, anyone who has ever played with dominoes knows that they can fall in either direction. A rigid literal interpretation has betrayed such groups as Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses into error. The

latter are clearly outside the bounds of the historic Christian faith. The Lutheran Church has rejected a literal interpretation of Revelation 20 on which millenialists base their belief that Christ will reign on earth for a thousand years. Besides, the faithful Lutheran interpreter will be preserved from gross error as he studies the Bible in its wider context. He accepts the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the only source and standard of Christian faith and life and the Lutheran Confession as a correct exposition thereof.

Some biblicistic Lutherans deny that they are fundamentalists. And they are right. For fundamentalists make church fellowship dependent on certain "fundamental" doctrines only, about which they are very rigid. But biblicistic Lutherans make every teaching from the least to the greatest divisive of church fellowship. This becomes superliteralism. It introduces bitter controversy and splinters the church as its history demonstrates to the present day. Both in Christian unity and in world mission outreach it has a poor track record. The historic initiative for those movements came from other sources. In practice, literalist Christians seem prone to take their eyes off the goal and so get lost in secondary matters.

IV

MISSION AND INTERPRETATION

We believe that most Lutheran Christians find that studying the Bible in its wider context frees them for mission and ministry under the lordship of Christ, who delivers from slavery to the letter and to the literalist.

To study the Bible in its wider context helps us be "all things to all men that we might by all means save some." To study God's mission word in its wider context at the point of origin gives us a framework for dealing with problems that arise. It

does not undermine the authority of God's Word but helps us understand its words of Law and Promise more clearly.

To study the Bible in its wider context does not result in Gospel reductionism. But it does lead us back to the Gospel. And that is what the Latin word *reducere* means: lead back. If more than half of all North American Lutherans believe that we are saved by our own reason, strength, and good works, such leading back to the Gospel is what we need.

A needless, unbiblical literalism can hamstring us in mission, driving many people away from our churches so that they never hear the Gospel.

After the unfavorable publicity The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod received in the news media because of its strife-torn convention at New Orleans in 1973, an energetic pastor in Texas found that some mission prospects were simply driving on when they spotted "Missouri Synod" on his church bulletin board. In frustration, he took paint can and brush and erased the words that had become a hindrance to mission.

A surface literalism can turn off many of our own sons and daughters, so that they are caused to stumble and give up faith in Jesus Christ. Do we want to destroy the faith of these little ones who believe in Christ? Do we want our children and our grandchildren to give up Christ because they turn away from the bondage of literalism? Do we want to drive our youth away from faith in Christ by insisting that only a literal interpretation of certain Bible passages is to be tolerated in the church of God? Is it not enough that they confess, "I believe that God has made me and all creatures"? Must they also

confess exactly *how* he made them, even though the Biblical context does not make all these details clear? Is it not enough that they believe that human beings, made in the image of God, have fallen into sin and have been redeemed, purchased, and delivered from all sins, from death and the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with Christ's holy, precious blood?

While some conservative churches may indeed grow faster, have we considered the human cost this often entails? Legalism, like libertarianism, often destroys and repels as many people as it wins. Legalistic church building efforts remind one of strip mining in their destructive effect on the environment. Their profits may be high, but they are paid for by society as a whole and by the entire Christian church.

Must the human interpretations of fallible men be made law in the Christian Church? Or do we wish to clear away needless human stumbling blocks from the path that leads to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord?

Is it perhaps high time that we get our understanding of mission and our concept of Biblical interpretation together? Otherwise, we run the risk of an unbiblical mission or of a non-missionary use of the Bible.

Does not the Holy Spirit operate in much the same way in God's mission both at the point of origin and at the point of delivery? Does He not adapt Himself to man's setting both in His revelation and in His mission?

Will this understanding not help to bring reconciliation and healing? What is your answer?

St. Louis, Mo.