

Worldview, Scripture and Missionary Communication

A more serious and strategic use of God's Word, when accompanied by prayer, has the potential for effecting one of the most significant spiritual breakthroughs in the history of missions.

by David J. Hesselgrave

David Wells writes, "Two decades ago, the debate was over the nature of Scripture; today the debate should be over its function"¹ One could wish that debate would not be necessary, that the responsible and full use of Scripture in church and mission would be so evident that only discussions having to do with enhancing effectiveness would be necessary. As many have pointed out, however, the Bible is so variously used, misused and unused that Wells's enjoiner is both appropriate and necessary. In fact, at this late date in my missiological pilgrimage, I have come to believe that, accompanied by prayer, a more serious and strategic use of God's Word has the potential for effecting one of the most significant spiritual breakthroughs in the history of missions .

With that potential in mind, I invite readers to consider certain assumptions and propositions relevant to missionary communication strategy. Perhaps we are in agreement on certain pre-suppositions and, if so, we might also agree on certain conclusions that could revolutionize the way many of us have gone about this all-important business of communicating Christ to the nations.

Initial Assumptions

Certain basic assumptions undergird the approach to missionary communication being advocated here. Apart from them, we would be more or less free to proceed as we think best. If we accept them as true, however, certain propositions and conclusions would seem to follow necessarily.

Assumption 1: As originally inspired and written, the Old and New Testaments constitute the complete, inerrant and authoritative Word of God. Of all words written by men, only those contained in the autographs of Scripture were so inspired and directed by the Spirit of God that together they can truly be called God's Word to mankind. All other words, no matter how true and meaningful, are still man's word and man's word alone.

Assumption 2: Concerning the nature of Christianity, it is, as Carl F. H. Henry has suggested, a "book religion" and that book is the Bible.² With Herbert Klem we can accept the idea that the Bible can be communicated orally as well as in printed form.³ Nevertheless, Christians are "people of the book" and that book is the Bible.

Assumption 3: With the authors of Scripture and the Lord himself we affirm that it is the Bible that the Holy Spirit uses to bring light, conviction, salvation and Christian maturity. To quote the Psalmist, "The unfolding of Thy words gives light," (Ps. 119:130). The Lord Jesus promised that when the Holy Spirit comes, He will convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8-11). He does it by means of the Word He himself inspired.

Assumption 4: Though Christian missions do many good and commendable things in the world, a priority was established by our Lord himself when he told us to "disciple the *ethne*" by going into all the world, baptizing in his name, and teaching them to observe all he commanded. (Matt. 29:19,20)

Evangelizing and gathering those who believe into New Testament churches is what the late Donald McGavran used to term "Great Commission mission."

Assumption 5: Conversion and Christian growth involves a worldview change in which the follower of Christ comes to understand and embrace God's revelation of truth and reality. This assumption requires somewhat more explanation. Thanks to the insights of anthropologists, theologians and others, we have come to understand better the relationship between worldviews (thought systems; assumptions about the nature of the world; the ways in which various peoples "see" the world) and Christian conversion and growth. As Robert Kurka says, worldviews have to do with such areas as "... what is God, or what is ultimate reality? What is the nature of man?... Where is history going. What happens to people at death?..." and so on.⁴ Given that understanding it is apparent that the "change of mind" and "renewing of the mind" involved in biblical conversion and Christian maturation is first and foremost a changed worldview. Whatever terms might be used, worldview change is intrinsic to discipleship. Christian values, behavior and institutions emanate from a changed worldview .

I appreciate the fact that the foregoing assumptions—or, at least, the ways in which I have stated them—are open to discussion and debate. But they are integral to what follows. To the degree that they are acceptable to readers the propositions that follow in the next section of this paper would seem

to be axiomatic. Four axioms fundamental to Scripture use and mission strategy follow.

Four Axioms

Axiom 1: It is the Bible itself, not just its messages, message on even its central message, that must be communicated to the world's peoples.

Insofar as communication without interpretation is possible, it is first of all the biblical text—not our interpretations, summations, or adumbrations—that is at once most needful and effective in the world today. This would seem to be obvious, but it is not at all self-evident when one reviews the ways in which much (most?) Christian communication proceeds. On the one hand, some of us have made this matter of communication unutterably complicated. On the other hand, the vast majority of us have proceeded under the assumption that the biblical Word and the biblical message as we understand and state that message are one and the same thing.

John Stott is helpful at this point. He writes:

The Bible does not just contain the gospel; it is the gospel. Through the Bible God is himself actually evangelizing, that is communicating the good news in the world. You will recall Paul's statement about Genesis 12:3 that 'the scripture...preached the gospel before-hand to Abraham' (Gal. 3:8 RSV). All Scripture preaches the gospel; God evangelizes through it.⁵

William Dyrness makes a similar case.

I will argue...that it is Scripture, and not its "message," that is finally transcultural... What is transcultural is not some core truth, but Scripture—the full biblical context of Christ's work. It is this that must be allowed to strike its own spark in the light of the needs of particular cultures⁶

When one thinks about it, does it not seem quite presumptuous that almost two millennia after God closed his special revelation we come along with our 1300-1350 cubic centimeters of cortical tissue pretty much locked into the cognitive and experiential domains of

one or two cultures, and hemmed in by the limitations of one (or two or three) linguistic codes, propose to theologize and contextualize in ways that purport to improve upon the Word of God by pressing it into molds of our own making?

Axiom 2: As is the case with all truly Christian theologizing, the arch or starting point for Christian communication should be the Bible and biblical theology.

This axiom adds yet another dimension to our understanding. Theologians and missiologists of a more liberal bent have often given preference to sociopolitical ideologies, cultural themes and religious histories, and even the struggles of the poor (or a combination of these) as starting points for doing theology and missiology. In spite of our commitment to Scripture, we conservative evangelicals all too often give preference to the findings of social scientists, or to our own devices such as the Four Spiritual Laws, or the "five things God wants you to know," or "redemptive analogies," dynamic-equivalent "transculturations" and so on. All such may indeed have their place, but we desperately need to remind ourselves that Christian theologizing, sermonizing and missionizing do not begin with religious history, human needs, philosophical constructs or cultural distinctives. Rightly understood, these begin with the Bible itself and with biblical theology!

This is extremely important. Merely saying "the Bible says..." is not the same as noting where the text is, turning to it, reading it, and explaining it in context. Biblical theology is not simply theology that is biblical. It is that type of theology that deals with the words and acts of God in history as they are revealed in the Old and New Testaments with a view to displaying their progression, meaning and significance.

As for doing theology, B. B. Warfield insisted that biblical theology in

this sense is the basis of all theologizing and voiced the hope that the time would come when no commentary would be -thought of as complete until "... this capstone [i.e., biblical theology] is placed upon its fabric."⁷ What a change Warfield's philosophy would make in current books designed to teach biblical truth.

As for mission and dialogue with the world, though it is unfortunate that Lesslie Newbigen restricts revelation to the form and substance of "biblical events," he nevertheless makes an important point when he insists that our day calls for a new arch for thought, and that arch is to be found in the Bible.⁸

Axiom 3: In Gospel communication, the Bible must be allowed to determine its own priorities, set its own agenda, and unfold its own plan.

People of all cultures have ways of deciding what is important, why it is important, and how it is to be considered. Philosophically, they speak of "truth." Ethically, they speak of the "good." Politically they speak of issues. Psychologically, they speak about "needs." Religiously, they speak of "power." Anthropologically, they speak of "values." Ethnically, they speak of "origins."

Now the problem here is not so much that people of all cultures are in all ways and at all times wrong. The problem is that, left to themselves, even sincere and brilliant unbelievers go only so far in thinking God's thoughts after him. In fact, even sincere and brilliant Christians may go only a few steps farther. What is needed always and everywhere—and especially in those cultures long separated from God and his Word—is a new and careful attention to the agenda and priorities already divinely set forth in Scripture.

Walter Kaiser Jr. puts it this way: "Rather than selecting that theological data which strikes our fancy or meets some current need, the text will already have set up priorities and prefer-

ences of its own.”⁹ He then goes onto show how these priorities and preferences can be identified.

The importance of this axiom can hardly be overstated. Shortly after the end of World War II, a missionary friend of mine was invited to preach in an historic Congregational Church in Kyoto, Japan. He spoke on idolatry—on the true God and false gods. After the service a deacon approached him and said, “Sensei, I have been a member of this church for fifty years. Never once in all that time have we heard a message on idolatry.” Imagine it! That church was located just a stone’s throw from the throne room where Japan’s “heavenly emperors” have been crowned for centuries. Those people had lived through a war designed to demonstrate the superiority of the gods of Japan over all other gods. And they had never once heard a sermon on idolatry!

We missionaries and pastors tend to set our own agendas and determine our own priorities. And sooner, but usually later, we discover that issues having to do with idolatry, ancestor veneration/worship, homosexuality, divorce, child-rearing, feminism and what have you creep up on us and catch us unawares. Shame on us!

Axiom 4: The whole of Scripture—the Bible in its entirety—must be communicated. For decades missions people have stood on the shoulders of theologians and trumpeted Christ’s words, “All authority has been given unto Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore....” For several decades the emphasis in evangelical missions has shifted from “all authority” to “all the *ethne*” (defined as “people groups”). The time may yet come when beleaguered missionaries will find cause to emphasize in a new and meaningful way Jesus’ promise, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

What we should ask ourselves now is this: “What about Jesus’ command to teach them to observe all he com-

manded?” Would not more attention to this particular universal represent more complete obedience and result in more lasting fruit? Scripture—all of it—is profitable and, rightly communicated, makes for adequately equipped people of God. Paul’s point in 2 Timothy 3:16,17 is not so much that all Scripture is *authoritative* as that it is all *profitable*. Why, then, do we stop short of Jesus’ command to teach them to observe all he commanded? Probably because we are intimidated by the breadth and depth of Scripture and fail to realize the fact that the “big story” of Scripture is essential to understanding and owning a Christian worldview. Worldviews, after all, are not a composite of complementary but poorly integrated notions and values. Rather, they are seamless garments with an unbroken pattern. They are blueprints with every feature of the building intact and in place. They are big stories—and stories within that story—with a plot and its resolution, with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Six Corollaries

Before concluding I would like to identify six methods of communicating Scripture that may be considered as corollaries of the above axioms. Each of them is worthy of elaboration that I cannot provide here at this time. They are listed because of their importance to “worldview change with regard to missionary communication” and to encourage attention to other writings that deal with them in more detail.

Corollary 1: We should begin by drawing attention to the Bible itself; by a consideration of the kind of book it is; by explaining its importance; by modeling its proper use.

Knowledge of God and his ways does not come by ecstatic spiritual experience as in Hinduism. It does not come by phantasmagoric myths handed down by wise men of the tribe or nation as in Shintoism. It does not come by Talmudic discussions as in modern Judaism. It does not come by mastering a hook and

language of heaven as in Islam. It comes from a humble preaching and hearing, reading and study, of the Bible. So that is where we should begin. (Or, that is where we should gravitate to as soon as possible.)

Corollary 2: We should make sure that the chronological unfolding of the plan and precepts of God in Scripture forms the primary context of gospel communication.

In a way, the classic argument as to whether the missionary should begin with Christ and the Gospel (narrowly defined) or begin with God and creation is a moot issue. In reaching unreached peoples close attention to the Christ of the Gospels would quickly refer us back to the God of creation, and careful attention to the Law and the Prophets would sooner or later lead us back to Christ and the Gospel.

Corollary 3: We should give precedence to biblical narrative as a form of contextualized communication.

In our culture many think that teaching by relating stories is for children only. And many theologians seem to feel that the narrative form of much of Scripture is incidental to its understanding and communication. Nevertheless, narrative has been the mode by which worldviews have been transmitted and understood by the people of almost all cultures all down through history. Hindus have their stories of Brahma and the World Egg. The Chinese have the story of Pan-Ku. The Japanese have their story of Izanagi and Izanami. Naturalistic evolutionists have their story of the primordial mists from which life somehow emerged. In an important sense it makes little difference whether or not these stories are “true” in the usual sense of the term. In one way or another, they “make sense” to those whose world-view they encapsulate and invigorate!

The God of the Bible revealed his person and plan in much the same way. To be sure, he did not restrict him-

self to narrative, but he did exploit its full potential. How tragic, then, when we neglect that narrative, especially when in the Bible we have not just a story but a true story, not just an interesting story but an absorbing story, and not just another mythological story but an “historical story.”

Corollary 4: We should make full use of pictures, drawings, charts, drama and other art forms as aids to an understanding of Scripture.

We are all aware of biases that result from past usages of such things as dispensational charts and grotesque artistic conceptions of Johannine visions. But the fact is that our sophistication can get in the way of effective intracultural and intercultural communication in two ways: by over-reliance on electronic media on the one hand, and by underestimating the potential of readily producible charts and drawings—and drama and mime—on the other.

Corollary #5: We should encourage the church to function as a “hermeneutical community.”

Members of the local congregation are in the best position to understand the language, rituals, problems and questions that arise from their own culture, especially in missionary situations. Missionaries and pastors, therefore, should gather the members of the congregation; learn from them; and then lead them in an examination of relevant Scripture. This may seem unrealistic to those trained in the intricacies of hermeneutical questions and methods. But basic hermeneutical principles can be taught and modeled even in missionary contexts. And with great promise!

Corollary 6: Insofar as possible, we should integrate all learning with a study of the biblical text.

Ralph Winter, William Osborne, James Oliver Buswell III and their colleagues at the U.S. Center for World Missions have done this in a way most

appropriate for our Western world.¹⁰ They have devised a course of study (The World Christian Foundations) that actually gives consideration to geological, historical, philosophical, cultural, linguistic and other relevant writings at appropriate junctures within the framework of a chronological study of the Bible. To replicate the approach in our existing educational institutions in the Western world would not be easy. But for its intended audience in the West, and for many situations in the non-Western world, this approach has unprecedented possibilities.

Conclusion

Charles H. Spurgeon once said that it is unnecessary to defend the Bible. The Bible is like a lion. Unleash it and it will defend itself. Of course, his statement is an overstatement. We all know that a defence of the Bible is both appropriate and necessary. But Spurgeon made an important point. Because the Bible is indeed the Word of God, its dissemination and proclamation can be expected to yield results quite apart from its defense.

Similarly, Gospel communication may take a variety of forms. We have no quarrel with that. But after all has been said and done, it is God’s Word that is to be made known to all peoples in all cultures. That Word is like a lion. Christian communicators should first of all unleash that lion!

End Notes

1. David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), p. 212.
2. Carl F. H. Henry, “The Authority and Inspiration of the Bible.” *In The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol I. Frank E. Gaebelin, gen. ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), p. 25, italics his.
3. Cf. KIem, Herbert V., *Oral Communication of the Scripture: Insights from African Oral Art*. (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1982).

4. Robert Kurka, “Comments on World Views.” In U.S. Center for World Mission, *Foundations of Global Civilization I*, (Pasadena: Institute of International Studies, 1993), p. 11A-1
5. John R. W. Stott, “The Bible in World Evangelization.” *In Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, rev. ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, gen. eds. (Pasadena. William Carey Library, 1992), p. A6.
6. William A. Dyrness, *Learning About Theology From The Third World*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), p.28.
7. B. B. Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology.” *In The Necessity of Systematic Theology*, second ed. John Jefferson Davis, ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), pp. 144-45.
8. Lesslie Newbigin, *Missions in Christ’s Way*. (Geneva. WCC Publications 1987), p. 28.
9. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House), pp. 11-12.
10. Cf. Ralph D. Winter, “Radical Breakthrough: Combatting the 2nd Largest Obstacle in Missions.” *Missionary Frontiers Bulletin*, March-April 1994, p. 3.

Dr. David Hesselgrave is served as missionary to Japan for twelve years. He is professor emeritus of the School of World Mission at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

[This article is an abridgment of a plenary presentation delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Region of The Evangelical Theological Society and The Evangelical Missiological Society, Moody Bible Institute, March 14-15, 1997.]