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"What Do These Stones Mean?" Passing on the Faith in Biblical Perspective

Douglas L. Gragg

Gary Holloway notes elsewhere in this issue of *Christian Studies* that a shift of emphasis in Christian education has occurred during the last two or three decades in Churches of Christ. He describes this as a shift from an emphasis on acquiring "Bible knowledge" to an emphasis on addressing various topics of contemporary concern. The older emphasis on Bible knowledge, he admits, had its problems. In practice, it often came across as dry rehearsal of biblical "facts." Holloway expresses concern, however, that the newer emphasis on addressing topics of contemporary interest may pose an even more serious problem. In practice, this approach often amounts to little more than "baptism" of conventional cultural wisdom or current fads of popular psychology.

I agree with Holloway that this latter problem is potentially more serious. Dry rehearsal of biblical facts is a poor approach to Christian nurture, but it represents only a problem of pedagogical deficiency. The solution is more thoughtful and creative teaching. When Scripture is replaced, however, by an alternative subject matter (whether deliberately or unwittingly), the enterprise ceases to be *Christian* nurture at all, regardless of how "meaningful" or "relevant" the curriculum might be.

What is to be done? How do we revitalize Christian education, avoiding the pitfalls of past and present? What follows are some brief reflections on these questions from the perspective of biblical theology.

What Do These Stones Mean?

A passage from the Book of Joshua provides a perspective that can clarify our situation. The context of the passage is Israel's crossing of the Jordan river to enter the land of promise.

When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua: ²"Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, ³and command them, 'Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight. . . .'" ¹⁹the people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they camped in Gilgal on the east border of Jericho. ²⁰Those twelve stones, which they had taken out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal, ²¹saying to the Israelites, "When your children ask their parents in time to come, 'What do these stones mean?' ²²then you shall let your children know, 'Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.' ²³For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, ²⁴so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, and so that you may fear the LORD your God forever" (Josh. 4:1-3, 19-24 NRSV).

Four points about Christian education grow out of the perspective provided by this text.

Christian Education Must Be Christian!

The first point is that Christian education must, in fact, be Christian. This means that the fundamental concern of Christian education is not to help people cultivate the "religious dimension" of their lives in some general sense but to nurture distinctively Christian faith. Teaching children the value of "sharing" or "kindness," teaching adolescents the importance of personal "quiet time" for meditation, or teaching adults how to enrich family life

or to cope with the stress associated with professional responsibility are all noble aims, but none is distinctively Christian.

Joshua 4 illustrates that biblical faith is rooted not in human spirituality or morality as such but in the story of the concrete acts of the living God. According to verses 20-23, it was through recollection of such concrete acts of deliverance as the crossing of the Jordan and of the Red Sea that Israel's faith was nurtured. In the same way, Christian faith is created and sustained through proclamation of the story of what God has done in Christ (see Rom. 10:17 and 1 Cor. 2:1-5).

This concern that Christian education be distinctively Christian may seem obvious, but, in fact, it runs counter to the prevailing trend in contemporary Christian education theory. In much contemporary theory, the fundamental concern is not with finding more effective ways to encourage engagement with the biblical story but with analyzing human "faith development" as such. James Fowler, for example, whose book, *Stages of Faith*,¹ has been a religious bestseller, is very candid about his interest in the analysis of faith as a universal human phenomenon.²

This interest in faith development and the dynamics of religious experience finds expression not only at a theoretical level but also in the churches. It is reflected, for example, in the growing preoccupation with sharing our personal "stories," or "spiritual autobiographies," and in the demand for sermons and classes that speak to us "where we are" in our personal spiritual pilgrimages. Perhaps there is nothing particularly wrong with this in itself, but it is remarkable how little interest the biblical writers themselves show in such matters. A recent remark of Stanley

¹James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

²Fowler, xiii. For a concise overview of Fowler's theory of faith development as a universal human phenomenon, see the chapter, "Faith Development Theory and the Human Vocation," in his *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 48-76.

Hauerwas and William Willimon on this very point is worth quoting:

Lately it has become fashionable to speak of "faith development" and "stages of faith," as if faith were a natural human ability, an instinctual urge. There may be some truth to the suspicion that we humans are incurably religious animals, that we are determined to bow down before something. Yet the Bible seems to have little interest in encouraging such behavior or in analyzing its dynamics, except perhaps as our "faith development," left to its own devices, is often an exercise of various forms of idolatry.³

The implication of this first point should be obvious. If faith in the living God is nurtured not through spiritual introspection but through encounter with the story of God's saving deeds, we must become concerned above all else to recapture the commitment we once had in Churches of Christ to serious Bible study.

The other three points to be made in conversation with Joshua 4 can be stated as three priorities. These are (a) the priority of content, (b) the priority of meaning, and (c) the priority of adult education.

The Priority of Content

The second point is that, if Christian education is, in fact, going to be Christian, we must emphasize content over technique. Holloway has noted the problem presented by Christian teachers and education ministers who are better trained in how to teach than in what to teach. If the goal of Christian education were simply to inculcate a particular set of attitudes or values or to encourage spirituality as such, mere technique might very well be sufficient. If the goal, however, is to bring Christians into more intimate contact with the living God, the emphasis must be on

³Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989) 22-23.

engagement with the story through which he has made himself known.

Of course, this does not mean that technique is unimportant. The stone memorial described in Joshua 4 was certainly intended to serve a pedagogical function as a "sign," provoking the curiosity of subsequent generations. The point that must be stressed, though, is that the "sign" only provided an occasion for telling the story. Its sole purpose was to point to the reality of what God did at the Jordan when Israel entered the land. Technique is important only to the extent that it enhances engagement with the content of the biblical story.

The Priority of Meaning

This emphasis on the priority of content over technique does not suggest a return to the "just-the-facts" approach of many sterile curricula used in the past. The third point, in fact, is that our goal must be to promote understanding of the *meaning* of the biblical story and not mere mastery of biblical "facts." This is illustrated in Joshua 4 in verse 24. The story of what God did for Israel bore a *message* not only for Israel ("that you may fear the LORD your God forever") but also for the world ("that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty").

The contemporary concern for greater "relevance" in Christian preaching and teaching is perfectly legitimate. Much of the instruction we dispensed and received in the past was, in fact, dry and lifeless. The answer, however, is not to turn our backs on Bible study or to "read into" the Bible insights derived from popular psychology or some other fount of cultural wisdom (as if one had to *make* the Bible relevant). The answer is, rather, to learn better how to *discover* the inherent relevance of the life-giving message of Scripture and to convey it to others. If we lose contact with the faith-generating story of God's saving deeds, we will have nothing of value to pass on to the next generation.

The Priority of Adult Education

This brings us to the last point. Passages like Joshua 4 and Deuteronomy 6 are often cited in support of the idea that the central concern of Christian education must be the training of our children. The question, "Will our children have faith?" is one that weighs heavily on the heart of every Christian. Is not the greater need, however, the Christian education of *adults*? Joshua says, "When your children ask their parents in time to come, 'What do these stones mean?' then you shall let your children know . . ." (Josh. 4:21-22a). This assumes that the parents *know the story*. That is an assumption that we can no longer make. There is an appalling rate of "biblical illiteracy" among adults in our churches. Since parents will teach the children the first priority of the church must be to see that adults are equipped for that task through a diet of serious Bible study.

Conclusion

These are four points, then, that can revitalize our efforts in the area of Christian education: (1) Christian education must, in fact, be distinctively Christian, (2) content must take precedence over technique, (3) we must move beyond mere mastery of biblical "facts" to engagement with the life-giving message of Scripture, and (4) our first priority should be the equipping of adults for the task of passing on the faith to the next generation.

The first two points serve as warnings to those tempted to abandon our historic emphasis on serious biblical instruction as the essential core of Christian nurture. The third point calls for us to demonstrate our seriousness about Bible study by cultivating more effective means of discerning and communicating the central message of Scripture than we employed in the past. The final point reminds us of the extent to which we have failed to maintain vital contact with "the faith once delivered to the saints" and the urgent need to rediscover for ourselves--and transmit to our children--the heritage of faith, hope, and love in which we stand.



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