



The Word and an Occupational Choice

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“I agree with you, the church needs to give more attention to the Bible,” said several people who responded to my explanation for returning to seminary teaching. Their statements startled me because I had not intended to demean the ecumenical, international or administrative activities in which I had been engaging. Nor had I meant to imply that the church had been neglecting the Bible. Rather, I had come through the kind of struggle that every church worker endures when alternate opportunities for service are offered. Where is the need for particular talents being presented with the best possibility for matching both the extension and the limitation of personal capabilities? The choice had to do with a theology of Christian calling more than with a theology of the Word.

Yet the challenge was clear. Word and calling belonged together. A teacher’s activities differed from an administrator’s, but both served under, by, and for the Word of God.

Both may be perceived under an action-reflection model. Administration usually demanded too much action to suit me and too little time for reflection. On the other hand, teaching can seduce one into so much reflection that the action of the church is neglected.

As an administrator, I had to snatch every snippet of Biblical insight from sermons at church services, devotions or papers at meetings, and interpretations applied in reaching decisions, either by others or from my own background. In fact, one of the pleasures in administrative work came from realizing how secular Jesus had been in his use of language. I am sure he would not like the church’s penchant for developing holy language as illustrated by its use of terms like stewardship. He used a word that is most accurately translated into contemporary English by the word “management,” as in some recent translations. Administration allowed opportunities for such insight from Scripture. I did not feel divorced from God’s Word as an administrator. Similarly, as I move into teaching, I shall not be removed from action. A gratifying connection with the recent past will be provided by my continuation on the Board of Directors of Lutheran World Relief, the Church World Service Committee of the National Council of Churches, the Commission on Inter Church

Aid, Refugees and World Service of the World Council of Churches and the Advisory Committee on Voluntary Foreign Aid which serves the federal government’s Agency for International Development. In addition to this special segment of the church’s international and ecumenical work, there will be increased opportunity to participate in conferences, continuing education events for pastors, and parish education programs. In fact, the requests for such service already far exceed the time available. My greatest effort must concentrate on working with the

students and their teachers who are engaged in relating Biblical teaching to the church's ministry.

While the types of activity are weighted differently for teaching as compared with administration, there is in both a constant exchange between Word and vocation. Or, as suggested by the title of this journal, every Christian lives with both the Word and the world.

THE WHY AND HOW OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

The invitation to teach, and indeed, the invitation to write a perspective for *Word & World*, forced me to consider why and how the interpretation of the Bible, and the Old Testament in particular, would be especially important at this time.

It is easy for me to accept the importance of the Bible uncritically. My confirmation pastor had taken the Bible so seriously and had drawn from it such powerful sermons on God's presence and grace, that I wanted to follow his example in ministry. I veered only in desiring further Bible study beyond seminary and in accepting the opportunities to serve as a teacher rather than as a parish pastor.

Graduate study and teaching forced me to test the assumptions I had taken for granted. I concluded that segments of history quite regularly took on distinctive significance for interpreting the meaning and purpose of life. Americans have followed this course in relating the formative events in their history to their reason for being. I could see that Biblical history, with the interpretations prescribed within the canon, provided a basis for the faith and practice of the believing community or the church, but also for a universal humanity made up of many distinguishable peoples.

Yet I also became aware of many pitfalls that needed to be avoided in accepting ancient documents as a resource for faith and living. The temptations to misuse Scripture are numerous and perennial. Some exist in epidemic proportions at the present time. My perception of the corrective that is needed relates to the methods of interpretation which had been developed in my previous teaching experience and which have been enhanced by my more recent encounter with ecclesiastical and societal developments.

For one thing, the Old Testament confronts the narcissistic tendencies of our time with the global dimensions of God's rule and shatters any narrow self concern, whether individualistic, parochial or denominational, with a divine seriousness about the affairs of nations and the market place.

Plenty of popular Biblical interpreters are jumping into political issues. Some offer grandiose schemes about the course of future history. All the more reason to give attention to sound methods of interpretation.

The Old Testament is replete with stories and description of situations in

what might be called secular life today. Relations between husband and wife, parent and child, and between siblings are portrayed with a detail and variety that far exceeds those in the New Testament. The same is true for the affairs of government and other social institutions. Therein lies the special contribution of the Old Testament, as well as the potential for misuse.

One may want to settle for imposing but carelessly drawn generalizations. One corrective lies in discerning the difference between the Old Testament cultural setting and our own social environment. Easy equations must be avoided lest we absolutize the patriarchal family or the

theocratic state, neither of which received universal acclaim even in the Bible. Similarly, predictions of the future need to be understood for the purpose to be served at the time of utterance, with the imagery pertaining to that time rather than prefiguring leaders or nations of the twentieth century, or of the nineteenth or eighteenth, since erroneous applications have been made over and over again.

One may try also to reduce the living situation to a moralistic rule, but that method usually ignores the different ways God is described as dealing with similar situations. And the New Testament must be remembered, especially Jesus' unwillingness to let legalistic interpretations destroy persons or stand in the way of meeting their true needs. Just as the Old Testament elaborates on earthly institutional life, it also probes the personal depth in human relationships and in the relationship with God. Along with much that is realistic to the point of being harsh cruelty, the Old Testament offers grounds for a sympathetic ministry to those who are losing the struggle for survival in the nerve-wracking confusion, insecurity and alienation that accompany frightening change in our time. Teaching the Old Testament is attractive because it offers the possibility of dealing with religion in a personal dimension that is comprehensive, encompassing what is private, what is ecclesiastical, and what is societal.

I have indicated that historical knowledge can show the limits of equations and generalizations for relating the Old Testament to modern life and can militate against depersonalizing the message. It can also be an influence against trivializing the message. For example, such questions as "Where could Cain get a wife without practicing incest?" deserve to be displaced by fundamental questions and affirmations. The story proclaims the great God who deals in justice and mercy with a sinner and who redeems human life. So using the historical method of Biblical interpretation is not an embellishment, like antiquing a piece of furniture. It is not gaining knowledge for its own sake or satisfying our desire for superiority over those who don't have it. It should not make us glory in the ancient past like a Miniver Cheevy. Historical knowledge should bring an appreciation of the real-life situations in which God works, a sense that what is temporary is holy and important to God, but above all, a perception of the eternity of God and of the continuing presence and redeeming work of God. What could be more important?

Yet the significance of the Old Testament unfolds within a community. The teacher is a learner, not only from books and advanced scholars, but from the students as they trouble over the Old Testament's meaning for their own lives and the lives of others with whom they now work or will work in the church. In addition, the study of the Old Testament must take its place among the other disciplines in the theological curriculum. The God proclaimed in the Old Testament is

the God incarnate in Jesus Christ and proclaimed in the New Testament church, confessed in the ancient creeds and the Reformation documents. Besides New Testament studies, historical studies, and doctrinal studies, the study of personal counseling, methods of ministry and social ethics should remind the seminary community that it is part of a much vaster community of believers, and indeed, a human community where Biblical understanding must pass the test of ever new situations as it has for thousands of years. In meeting the needs of human life far beyond the classroom, the distinctive revelation of the Bible shows its real importance.