



The Bible, Congregational Leaders, and Moral Conversation

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How many sermons can you remember in detail? If you are like me, not very many. How many lectures can you remember? Again, for me, not many. However, how many preachers can you remember for their good preaching? For me, several. Likewise, I can remember several good teachers for their great lectures. No matter how old an observation, it remains nonetheless true: We tend to remember the preacher more than the sermon, the teacher more than the lecture.

Perhaps that is all we have recently learned in a preliminary study of twelve congregations in the Southwestern Minnesota Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (SW Synod). However, there are some nuances that raise very important questions for theological education in seminaries and congregations—and, even more important, insights for the role of leaders and their use of Scripture in the moral conversations within congregations. In short, we have found from dozens of interviews with members of these congregations that congregational leaders are very important in moral conversations within these congregations. They are so important that they are, in practice, if not in principle, even more important than the Bible.

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I. CONGREGATIONS AS COMMUNITIES OF MORAL CONVICTION

Within the past year, several congregations in the southwestern part of Minnesota along with the Board for Church and Society of the Southwestern Minnesota Synod ELCA,¹ synod staff,² and research staff from the Lutheran Leadership Institute³ have joined the Project for Congregations as Communities of Moral Conviction.⁴ They have sought to add to the substantial body of congregational studies that has grown over the last several years.⁵ This body of studies has taken the congregation seriously in new ways. Rather than assuming the life of congregations as in most studies of the church, these studies have made congregations their focal point.

As obvious as this seems, such an approach is relatively rare. Few if any seminaries have courses that take seriously the inner dynamics of a congregation. Those that do, tend to reduce the discussion either to historical or social and psychological categories. They have not been directly theological. That is, they have not “thought God first”⁶ nor sought “to understand God truly,”⁷ nor have they included God either in their explanation of the behavior of the congregations being studied or in the process of research.

Neither have they sought to invite the congregations to be primary actors in the study rather than its objects. The Project for Congregations as Communities of Moral Conviction seeks to include historical, social, and psychological categories but goes beyond these approaches to engage the congregations as primary researchers and empower them to do theological research.

In the preliminary stage of the study a dozen congregations have been recruited to investigate their own communal life and to do so in light of God's action both within and outside the congregation. The research model intends to listen to the voices of members speaking of moral conversation in these twelve congregations. It invites the members to reflect on their practices in light of God's

¹The Board at the time of initiation of the project was chaired by Ronald W. Duty.

²Namely, Barbara Knutson, assistant to the bishop; the project had the strong support and endorsement of Bishop Charles Anderson.

³Patricia Taylor Ellison and Patrick R. Keifert.

⁴This project was funded under a planning grant from the Lilly Endowment. Special thanks to The Rev. Dr. James P. Wind for his support, especially his insight and foresight in congregational studies. See his "Leading Congregations: Discovering Congregational Cultures," *Christian Century* (February 3-10, 1993) 105-109.

⁵For a short introduction to the congregational studies movement see Carl S. Dudley, "Giving Voice to Local Churches: New Congregational Studies," *Christian Century* (August 12-19, 1992). What follows is a shortened bibliography used in the article: Joseph C. Hough, Jr. and Barbara G. Wheeler, eds. *Beyond Clericalism: The Congregation as a Focus for Theological Education* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988); Carl S. Dudley and Douglas Alan Walrath, *Developing Your Small Church's Potential* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson, 1988); Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985); James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); David R. Ray, *The Big Small Church Book* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1992).

⁶Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983) ixff.

⁷David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological about Theological School* (Louisville: Westminster, 1992).

actions. In this way the approach is at once giving voice to the congregations and inviting them to do explicit theological reflection rather than simply observing them in terms of historical, social, and psychological methods.

The preliminary stage in our research involved training selected members of the congregations to do basic participant observer ethnographic research.⁸ This required a weekend retreat, substantial written materials, and follow-up conversation with the recruited participant observers. The participant observers, while initially unconvinced of their ability to accomplish the task, were persuaded at least to try the process. Their efforts were far more fruitful than our initial expectations or even hopes.

All of the congregations participated. All the participant observers completed the minimum number of interviews and many completed many more.⁹ All the congregations have indicated a strong interest in the continuing project. All have responded to the participant observer approach, although some were at first quite skeptical. All have found the explicit theological reflection both informative and exciting and asked for more time and effort on this particular aspect in the continuing stages.

II. THE STRANGE SILENCE OF THE BIBLE

On the basis of these initial interviews and follow-up conversations with many of the participant observers, several important observations can be made. Perhaps the most disturbing is the apparent absence of the Bible in the day-to-day moral conversations of the congregations studied. Few, if any, persons interviewed spoke of the Bible as a critical ingredient in these

conversations within the congregation. The Bible was mentioned most often when controversial issues regarding national issues were discussed. Since these topics did not make up a major portion of the conversations, the Bible played almost no explicit role in the moral conversations that took place in these congregations.

When the Bible was mentioned in the explicit conversation regarding controversial issues, its use might best be divided between two extremes. The first extreme I call “Bible bullets.” Certain verses were shot by one side against the other with the assumption that they would end the argument. Like a fatal bullet, they killed any possible reply. The second extreme, often a reaction to the Bible-bullet phenomenon, rejected any use of particular Bible verses, calling such behavior “proof texting” and calling instead for the use of general principles of the Bible: e.g., love, grace, or justice. In most cases, even when the Bible was mentioned as contributing to moral conversations within the congregations, it seldom led to fruitful conversations regarding the moral question at hand; rather it served to cut off or usurp the moral discussion, and so the biblical text was abandoned.

⁸Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley and William McKinney, eds., *Handbook for Congregational Studies* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986).

⁹The minimum number was three; the majority did many more.

What can explain this strange silence of the Bible in our interviews? Perhaps it is the fault of the questions. The questions did not explicitly ask the interviewees to reflect on the role of Scripture in the congregations’ decision-making or ongoing moral conversation.¹⁰ Had we asked an explicit question regarding the role of the Bible we might have received explicit discussion of these matters. Still, we gave the respondents ample opportunity to reflect on the place of Scripture, since we asked what were the significant factors in decision-making and moral conversations within the congregation.

Perhaps we are seeing the practical implications of the growing biblical illiteracy within the mainline denominations. Recent studies have shown that both baby-boomers and baby-busters, even active members of congregations, are biblically illiterate, especially when compared to persons over fifty-five.¹¹

Perhaps more ominously we are seeing the reality of what one major study of baby-boomers in the Presbyterian Church (USA) has called “the theology of lay liberalism.”¹² “The theology of lay liberalism” is not so much a reflection of classical liberal theological positions of the nineteenth century as a contemporary, conventional wisdom about religion. This set of assumptions believes that religion is very important but that most, if not all, religions are equally important and equally “true.” That is, the question of truth is not really raised within these assumptions. Instead, each religion is thought to be equally important and valuable. While Scripture is held in high regard “in principle,”¹³ its day-to-day use is almost non-existent. In short, there is a functional nihilism in most of the responses in the Presbyterian Church (USA) study. The Southwestern Minnesota preliminary study may be confirming the suspicion that this functional nihilism is present in ELCA congregations as well.

III. SEMINARIANS AND THE BIBLE

Some personal experience as a teacher at a seminary with many students from

congregations similar to those that dominate the Southwestern Minnesota

¹⁰Questions were quite open ended. For example, “How do decisions in your congregation get made? Who are the leaders that influence congregational actions on morally disputed topics? How do they lead?” The role of Bible classes and other adult education programming was included.

¹¹Peter L. Benson and Carolyn H. Eklin, *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1990).

¹²Benton Johnson, Dean R. Hoge, and Donald A. Luidens, “Mainline Churches: The Real Reason for Decline,” *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* (March 1993) 15: “We have named this pattern the theology of lay liberalism. It is ‘liberal’ because its defining characteristic is the rejection of the view that Christianity is the only religion with a valid claim to truth. It is ‘lay’ because it does not reflect any of the theological systems contained in the writings or seminary lectures of today’s postorthodox Christian intellectuals.”

¹³By “in principle,” I am pointing to the great divide between the enduring belief that the Bible is the “inspired word of God” and the lived biblical illiteracy. Americans seem exceedingly satisfied with giving metaphysical compliments to the Bible while remaining quite ignorant of the content of the Bible. Studies continue to show a high percentage of Americans believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God and yet cannot identify four books of the Old and New Testaments. Cf. George Gallup and George Barna, *The Barna Report 1992-93: An Annual Survey of Life-Styles, Values and Religious Views* (Ventura, California: Regal, 1992) 24-25, 74-76, 108-109, 125-128.

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study only exacerbates these suspicions. Over the past twelve years, Donald Juel, a New Testament scholar, and I, a systematic theologian, have taught a course, focusing on the Gospel of Mark, entitled, “Truth and Meaning: Uses of the Bible Narrative.” We explore several theories of truth and hermeneutics and do so by reflecting on regular reading of the Marcan text.

Students in this class have already had at least an introductory course to historical critical method and other hermeneutical theories. They have had at least two other critical courses in biblical studies, if not several. In light of this advanced point in their seminary work, we were fairly confident we could ask relatively sophisticated questions of truth and method. At the beginning of the course we ask students to write a short, five-page paper on the following questions: “What do we mean when we say that the Bible is true? And what methods of interpretation appreciate that truthfulness?”

The students’ initial replies are revealing. Most (easily 85%) spend most of their five pages rejecting a “fundamentalist” view of Scripture. In other words, they are quite clear what they do *not* mean when they say that the Bible is true and what methods do *not* appreciate that truthfulness. They do not know what they *do* mean. They do not have a positive answer to the question.

Equally interesting is the rather large number of students (well over half) who refuse to answer the question as stated because they are uncomfortable speaking of “we.” Instead, they take what they consider a far more modest and morally appropriate discussion of what “I” mean. In short, most have no sense of a communal commitment to the truth and interpretation of Scripture.

Since we have taught hundreds of students, with the large majority taking these positions, it might not be surprising that our preliminary study in the Southwestern Minnesota project would find few congregations explicitly speaking of the use of Scripture in their decision-making or moral conversation. This is in fact the case, since the same preliminary study shows that certain key leaders are critical in the ongoing moral conversation and decision-making in a

congregation. Chief among these congregational key leaders, though not the only one,¹⁴ was the pastor of the parish. If the pattern observed among these hundreds of seminarians is in any way indicative of the pastors in these congregations, and if these pastors are as critical to moral conversation in a congregation as our preliminary research shows, it should come as no surprise that the Bible is not explicitly used in the day-to-day moral conversation in these congregations.

IV. FOR FURTHER STUDY

These preliminary results suggest several trajectories for further research. One trajectory clearly needed is an examination of our questions and the method

¹⁴One of the very important outcomes of this preliminary study is the striking importance of key lay leaders in each of the congregations. These lay leaders represented as important a leadership role as clergy in most cases. However, none of the respondents saw this as a conflictual model of leadership. This finding merits much further exploration and will receive it in the next stages of the project.

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we used to gather our data. For example, have our questions somehow excluded reflection on the role of the Bible in the moral conversations in these congregations? Another trajectory would be to ask how key leaders exercise their influence in the day-to-day moral conversations in the congregation, particularly how they use the Scriptures. Still another trajectory would be to examine the relationship between the pastor and other key leaders in the process of moral conversations. When the Bible does function in moral conversation, what different methods are used and what functional theology does such use of the Bible imply? Still more interesting would be studying ways of introducing the Bible and theological reflection into the day-to-day moral conversations in these congregations.

What might these initial findings imply for continuing education of key leaders, especially clergy? What might they reveal about theological education both in the congregation and the schools of theology? Are we, in fact, teaching students more of what they ought *not* believe, teach, and confess than what they ought to believe, teach and confess, especially regarding the truth claims of the Bible? These and other questions indicate both the promise of the present research and the potential depth of the crisis of the Bible and moral conversation in contemporary mainline Christian congregations.

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