

SEARCHING FOR THEOLOGICAL WHOLENESS

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As president of Saskatchewan Conference, I had the opportunity to hold a workshop on christology in each of the ten United Church presbyteries in Saskatchewan. The workshop consisted of four parts, each part representing an essential component in christological method.

The first part was biblical: people gathered into groups of six to ten persons, and each person told the group something that she/he remembered about Jesus – a story, a teaching, or an event in Jesus' life which the person particularly liked to remember. The point of this process was to recover something of the historical or biblical Jesus which must be the basis for sound theological statements about Jesus.

The second part was contextual: in the same groups, each person told the group what he/she thought was a particularly serious problem affecting people in our time, either as individuals or collectively. The point of this process was to bring into view some of the things for which Christ might be found to be a saviour. The assumption was that, as Tillich once said, nothing is as irrelevant as the answer to an unasked question. Jesus, to be our real saviour, must be the answer to real problems in our lives and in the world.

The third part was choosing a theological model or models to reflect one's convictions about Jesus. Each person was given a sheet of paper with five columns on it; the first four columns representing four models of christology which have commonly occurred in Christian history. The fifth column was blank, leaving a space for the individual to propose another model of her/his own preference. The four models were described by headings with a number of explanatory statements listed beneath each heading (see below).

A. As Our Model/Teacher Jesus <u>Shows Us</u>	B. As the Lamb Slain Jesus <u>Redeems Us</u>	C. As the Risen Christ Jesus <u>Liberates Us</u>	D. As the Divine Person Jesus <u>Lives With Us</u>	E. As..... Jesus.....
1. What God is like 2. That God loves us 3. How to be human 4. How to forgive 5. What love requires 6. 7.	1. By his sacrifice on the Cross 2. By bearing our guilt before God 3. By paying for our sins 4. By taking the punishment we deserve 5. By satisfying God's righteousness 6. 7.	1. By the power of God's Kingdom 2. From social/economic evils 3. From psychological hang-ups 4. From a legalistic outlook 5. From the fear of death 6. 7.	1. Guides us in living 2. Comforts us in trouble 3. Shares our joys and sorrows 4. Keeps us from loneliness 5. Unites us with each other 6. 7.	1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7.

People were asked to go through the statements and put an "X" beside each statement about Jesus that they personally would not be comfortable with. The point here was to identify the theological models and statements about Jesus which were not usable to the participants and, conversely, to find theological statements about Jesus which would adequately reflect the peoples' beliefs about him. Column E and the blank spaces at the bottom of each column invited the sharing of other preferred theological statements about Jesus.

The fourth part of the workshop was application, which was only briefly begun. It consisted of connecting each person's preferred statements about Jesus with the contextual problem or situation which the person felt to be most urgently in need of salvation. Each person was asked to select the statement or model from the third part which he/she felt to be most important for our time and to say briefly why they made this choice.

The results of all the four parts of the workshop were gathered and collated, giving a revealing picture of christological thinking in the ten presbyteries of Saskatchewan conference. Some of the results are of interest for the present essay.

Firstly, it was apparent that the participants carry a lot more biblical content in their heads than might be suspected by those who think United Church people are biblically weak. The number of different memories of Jesus listed in each presbytery was high; the diversity of memories was large.

The similarities of memories in the various presbyteries was also interesting: Jesus blessing the children was listed most frequently in all ten presbyteries. Why this should be so is a matter for speculation. Was it because this story is recalled liturgically in baptism services which occur with regularity and frequently in the church? Or was it because there is a child in each of us and the story assures us of God's unconditional love? In any case, it is a good story to be remembered by the majority of participants.

Other stories remembered by many participants were the woman at the well, Jesus calming the storm, the woman caught in adultery, Jesus as a boy in the temple, the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. The prominence of stories about Jesus and women may be due to the strength of the feminist movement in Saskatchewan where there are proportionately more ordained and commissioned women than elsewhere in Canada. The feminist movement has raised awareness of the great number and significance of stories about women in the four gospels.

One may also suspect that a growing practice of following the lectionary in weekly Sunday worship accounts, in part, for the wide variety of stories remembered. The use of the Whole People of God church school curriculum has encouraged the following of the lectionary.

The numbers of serious problems listed by the participants was also high and the similarities were interesting. There appeared to be a clear trend to see spiritual problems as most serious. Lack of purpose, lack of faith, lack of love, meaninglessness, greed, selfishness, fear and materialism were most frequently cited. It was noteworthy that poverty, hunger, ecology and racism were not listed often in comparison to other problems cited. As we shall see, the focus on personal rather than sociological problems was reflected in the preferences for christological models.

In the third part of the workshop process there was a strong antipathy evident toward the language and logic of Jesus' redeeming us by substitutionary satisfaction or punishment. There was a small number of participants for whom Jesus' redeeming death was underlined as the most important christological affirmation, but the large majority of participants were not comfortable

with the statements explaining the Redeemer model. And there was a conspicuous lack of suggestions, in the blank spaces provided, about the significance of Jesus' death. There appeared to be something of a theological vacuum concerning the meaning of Jesus' death.

Something similar was also the case concerning the model of Jesus as Liberator. A lot of participants were not comfortable with statements explaining the liberation model and few suggestions were offered for explaining it more fully.

The most popular model was that of Jesus as a human teacher who shows us how to be human, how to forgive, what God is like and that God loves us. The next most popular model was Jesus as the divine person who lives with us, guiding us in life and uniting us with each other.

In summary, the results of the workshops show a rich biblical engagement by the participants but, perhaps, some serious theological weakness concerning the significance of Jesus' death and the centrality of his liberating mission.

The two main sacraments, baptism and communion, both focus on Jesus' death. One wonders what the sacraments mean to those who are not comfortable with the traditional Redeemer explanation of Jesus' death. Furthermore, if Jesus' death is interpreted as the price he paid for his work of seeking justice and liberation or as the outcome of loving his enemies, this understanding also appears to be weak, adding to the theological vacuum pertaining to Jesus' Passion.

I am not suggesting that the traditional Redeemer model of substitutionary satisfaction or punishment should be reinforced or promoted in the church. In fact, I believe that this model is not well founded biblically and is, rather, a misinterpretation of Jewish sacrificial thinking. The model of Redeemer is certainly present in the scriptures and needs to be interpreted appropriately as part of a wholistic understanding of Jesus' death. How this can be done is a matter for another essay. A clue to the proper approach is to see Jesus as representative rather than substitute in his death. Similarly, the Messiah's liberation work of establishing justice on the earth is an essential component of an adequate christology and needs to be strengthened in many Christians' faith.

Out of one's own personal experience, it is possible to reach conclusions about God's love or to recognize Jesus' compassion and integrity. But understanding the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection requires sound teaching in the church. The sacrament of baptism has been frequently misunderstood or not understood, especially in its allusions to Jesus' death and resurrection. Similarly, the sacrament of Communion can easily be misunderstood or not adequately understood. Unless the church finds ways of teaching these basic theological doctrines, it risks having widespread spiritual anaemia which weakens the life and work of its members.

How the church moves toward developing theological wholeness is a crucial question, especially in a time when, according to Dr. Reginald Bibby, a "consumer" approach to religious beliefs is rampant, people "shopping around" for their own basket of beliefs to suit their particular tastes.

It seems clear that the church needs to create more ways for people to explore in more depth the whole range of biblical and theological affirmations about God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. Christian development has to be strengthened. Continuing education is needed not only for clergy but also for lay people.

There are numerous possibilities for doing this. Video resources are a most promising method. Is there any reason why videos could not be reproduced and distributed to church libraries as cheaply as books -- especially if this were done on an ecumenical basis? In videos, the best teachers can be available to do the teaching. Videos are also very effective in stimulating

discussion among viewers, whether in the family or in a church group. Videos can be replayed to consolidate and confirm the new learning. The pictures can be worth thousands of words.

In North American fundamentalist history, the most significant means of achieving lasting theological formation has been the Bible Schools in which young adults receive two or more years of intense instruction in their faith which then appears to hold steady throughout the rest of their lives. Is there any reason why the ecumenical churches could not offer similar post-secondary Christian formation through the existing network of continuing education centres? It is surely a matter of will and priority. Can our churches afford not to have the will and set the priority for developing theological wholeness?

What other means are there for nurturing theological wholeness in the church? More theological preaching? More theologically profound liturgy? The Eastern Orthodox Churches have managed for centuries to teach their faith to members primarily through the medium of liturgy.

One thing is sure. When people are adequately instructed in their faith, it strengthens their religious identity. Paul McKeague was a Christian raised without adequate theological teaching in his faith. He married a Jewish woman and took an eight month course of teaching from a Rabbi in order to understand Judaism better. He is now converted to Judaism. A Christian reading his story is impelled to think that if he had ever had a good eight month course in the Christian faith, he might now be a Christian. The point, of course, is not to be competitive with Judaism or any other religion. It appears that Judaism is the right religion for him.

But the fact remains: Paul McKeague did not understand his own family's faith tradition. His religious identity was not strong enough even to enter into dialogue with a person of another faith. Fortunately, he received religious instruction from the Rabbi and has come to theological wholeness that he might never have found if he had not had reason to search for it.