

Correspondence

Theological Proclamation: A Response to Herbert Hoefler's *Proclaiming a "Theologyless" Christ*

by Brian Nystrom

Along with proclaiming repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name, the church is called to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to be obedient to the commands of Christ. To accomplish this task, we are sent with the authority of Christ and promised His presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. Can this call, placed upon the church by its author and perfecter, its head, be fulfilled through "theologyless" proclamation? Are we mandated in Scripture, either by word or example, to give the facts of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to a culture and leave them to figure out what it means to them?

Why did Jesus die? What happened on the cross? To answer these questions, the Synoptic gospels present a clear and simple theology of the cross. Jesus came to man as a Savior (Lk. 2:11, 30) because man was lost in his sins (Mt. 1:21). He accomplished this salvation through the shedding of his blood and his death on the cross (Lk. 22:19-20, Mk. 14:24, Mt. 26:28) because his life was required as a ransom for man (Mk. 10:45, Mt. 20:28). His death would be followed by his resurrection on the third day (Lk. 18:33). This salvation is appropriated by man through faith in Him (Mk. 1:15). Every aspect is not explained; but a clear presentation of the vicarious nature of the Jesus' death and resurrection is given.

Beyond this simple but profound explanation of the cross, the Synoptics repeatedly look back to and assume their hearers understanding of the Old Testament (Mt. 26:54, Mt 1:22, Lk 24:44). Upon reflection, we do not find theological silence but theological clarity in the proclamation in the Synoptics. This clarity comes by connecting Jesus with the Christ, whose purpose and ministry

is explained in the Old Testament; a theme that is continued in the book of Acts.

In the book of Acts we see that the purpose of proclamation is connecting "this Jesus" with the Christ of the Old Testament. Jesus was delivered up according to "the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). Jesus is typified, through linkage to the stories of Joseph and Moses, as a ruler and redeemer who is rejected by his people (Acts 7:9-16, 25, 34-35). Jesus is the promised Savior in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Acts 13:23, 29, 32-33). And those who are familiar



with these prophecies are appealed to for belief (Acts 26:26-27).

It is instructive to note what happened when Jesus presented his disciples with the facts of his life, death and resurrection, a "theologyless" proclamation, not once (Mt. 16:21, Mk. 8:31, Lk. 9:22), not twice (Mt. 17:22, Mk. 9:31, Lk. 9:44), but three times (Mt. 20:18, Mk. 10:33-34, Lk. 18:32-33)? He was met by responses which included rebuke, distress, fear and lack of understanding. You can just imagine the look on their faces. It is the same look that is on the person's face who is trying to figure out what in the world you are talking about when you have mispronounced a phrase in a language you are learning. Perhaps the clearest description of the disciple's response is recorded in Luke 18:34, "But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said."

What was necessary then to give them understanding of these things? Luke

tells us that two things were necessary: (1) an opening of the mind to understand the Scriptures (Lk. 24:45); and (2) an opening of the Scriptures, connecting "this Jesus" with "the Christ" (Lk. 24:25-27, 32, 44-48). One is a divine work, the other a human/divine work. One a matter of prayer, the other a matter of prayerful teaching.

Do we see this idea supported in the early days of the church? Acts 17 is very instructive; not so much for the proclamation recorded as for the insights into Paul's strategy. We see in vv. 2-3 that Paul's custom was to go to the synagogue and "reason with them from the Scriptures."

The purpose was to explain and prove the necessity of the Christ's death and resurrection and to show that "this Jesus" and "the Christ" are one and the same. Notice the following key words: "custom" (a habit, not an isolated instance but a pattern of behavior); "reason" (question and answer dialoguing); "explain" (to open with the intent to reveal); "prove" (present evidence in support of something). Thus the proclamation of "this Jesus" in the foreground is accompanied by intellectual stimulation in the background.

What is clear is that Paul's proclamation was not "theologyless" but theological; providing clarity, explanation and proof. God responded by bringing people to faith (v. 4). Paul opened the Scriptures; God opened the minds. This is the pattern of proclamation revealed in the New Testament and needed in today's world.

This pattern was not limited to the proclamation to the Jews; but, as suggested by v. 5, included Gentiles. This is clarified in v. 17 where Paul is showed applying this same strategy to those in the marketplace in Athens, "with those who happened to be there." Once again, the proclamation is accompanied by explanation. God's response is the same, "but some men joined him and believed" (v. 34).

Another point that needs to be clarified is the theological reflection of the early church as recorded in the New Testament as compared to the theological reflection of the church throughout its history. The Gospel of John and the New Testament letters do present the reflections of the early church and do impose a theological explanation of the cross and resurrection. However, this “imposition” is unique in that it is a divine imposition, not to be repeated again in the history of the church. Any post-New Testament canon theological reflection by the church, to be valid, must be based upon the divinely revealed explanations as recorded in the New Testament. There is not a need for the various cultures of the world to “frame” their own theological explanations of the death and resurrection. There is a need for these cultures to hear the gospel, the message of the cross, in such a way that they can understand and respond in their own cultural context. There is a need for missionaries to these cultures to open the Scriptures and allow God to open the minds of the hearers so that “those appointed to eternal life will believe (Acts 13:48).

We cannot avoid the difficulty that the world will have with the vicarious nature of the Christ’s death. Scripture is clear that the message of the cross is folly and a stumbling block to the perishing (1 Cor. 1:22). However, to those who are being saved, to those who are called, it is the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:18, 22). The need for the world of our day, therefore, is not “theologyless” proclamation. The need is for culturally appropriate theological proclamation. Reason and proclaim. Ask God to open the minds as we open the Scriptures. Spirit and truth.

Brian Nystrom has served for 10 years as a church planter with the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, and is currently working with Indian groups in the Amazon Basin.

Response to Brian Nystrom by Herbert Hoefler

I’m thankful for the thoughtful response to my article on “Proclaiming a ‘Theologyless’ Christ.” When I wrote the article, I toyed with the idea of framing the discussion as proclaiming a “culture-free” Christ. However, it is obvious that every theology is rooted in some culture. What I hoped to stimulate was consideration of how our Western missionary proclamation might get free from our Western theological categories. Then I would hope people could frame the eternal Gospel in their own cultural terms.

My concern is primarily the outreach to the cultures of the 10-40 window. Christians of these new churches must be freed to do their own theology. They need to frame the Gospel message in categories that are intelligible and relevant to the people of their culture. As the respondent has stated: “The need is for culturally appropriate theological expression.”

I certainly agree that any theology must be consonant with Holy Scripture. However, orthodox theology is not merely parroting biblical passages and categories. Our very Nicene Creed uses a Greek philosophical term “*homousias*,” which is not a biblical term, to explicate the biblical truth of the divinity of Christ. Likewise, I would anticipate culturally rooted theologies to use metaphors and categories that accurately express the vicarious atonement of our Lord. At the end of the article, I ventured what such various biblically faithful theologies might look like.

St. Paul was guided by the Holy Spirit to explicate the meaning of Jesus’ suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension. He was rooted in Jewish culture, and he largely used Old Testament imagery for interpreting the meaning of Christ’s atoning work. He went regularly to the synagogues, for the Jews and the Gentile “God-fearers” there would under-

stand his theology. When St. Paul went to Athens, he did not use Old Testament imagery but references from their own culture and history.

My expectation is that the Holy Spirit can also guide new believers to frame an understanding of the Gospel message which is both intelligible and faithful. My caution is that we Western missionaries tend to impose our 11th century Anselmian paradigm as the one authentic explication of the Gospel. We can only explain the Gospel in the way that makes sense to us, but this very explanation quickly becomes normative, squelching any creative attempts from within the new culture.

We have largely failed to make any significant evangelistic impact on the great non-Western cultures of the world. Not only has our mission effort been colored by our association with Western colonialism, but our theology and church forms also have been a Western cultural invasion. My suggestion is that we approach our Gospel proclamation in a manner that is as free as possible of Western tradition and as freeing as possible for local Christians to root the Gospel message in their own cultural forms.

As missionaries, we can and should be partners in this enterprise, to help avoid drifting into heresy. But the enterprise must be owned by the people. If it makes sense to them, it will make sense to their pre-believing neighbors, and that’s our prime mission goal. **IJFM**

Herbert Hoefler is a former missionary to India, having served from 1968-1983 with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. He is currently professor of theology at Concordia University, Portland, Oregon.