

Teaching Religious Knowledge in Context

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I am fully aware of the fact that the subject you are teaching is no longer called "*Religious Knowledge*"(RK), but "*Bible Knowledge*"(BK). The reason for that change, I assume, is that it is more specific and readily identifies your subject as a *Christian* subject in distinction from a *Muslim* one. I have no real quarrel with that change, but I still prefer to use the old name in this speech because of the meaning of the word "religious" or "religion."

The Bible can be read from many points of view: historical, literary, anthropological, etc. None of these are invalid in themselves. Nevertheless the *main* purpose of the Bible lies not in any of these, but in its religious aspect and thrust. The main aim of the Bible is a religious or spiritual one, namely to point us to God and our relation to Him and to this world. The Bible is the main way in which the Lord has chosen to speak to us not in some objective scientific fashion, but in order to change people deep down in the bottom of their hearts. It is not taught, or should not be taught, *first of all* to add one more skill or understanding to our arsenal of abilities. When we teach it, we must teach it in such a way that our students hear the voice of God Himself. And that is a *religious or spiritual* hearing, not merely academic. It is a hearing in the *heart*, not merely in the mind, though the mind will be renewed in the process.

What is religion? It is our relationship to the Lord God, at least, if it is Christian religion. But it can also be non-Christian and then it can take many forms. It can take the form of Islam or Traditional Religion with their own rites. It can also take

the shape of materialism, when a person has given his heart to the pursuit of wealth for its own sake. That religion may not have rituals, but it is a religion nevertheless, for it constitutes a heart-based loyalty. One's religion is his final loyalty, his ultimate values that guide him consciously or unconsciously in all his ambitions, pursuits and goals. And that religion is based in one's heart. *It is this heart that is the centre of our lives, the place where the basic decisions are made. It could be compared to a headquarters.*

That is, of course, the reason the Bible speaks so much about our heart. According to the famous theologian G. C. Berkouwer, the Bible uses the term "heart" especially to refer to man in his "concentrated unity." "Keep your heart with all vigilance; for from it flow the springs of life" (Proverbs 4:23). The Lord looks first of all at a man's heart (I Samuel 16:7), because that is where all the issues are decided. "My heart instructs me" (Psalm 16:7). God tries men's "minds and hearts" (Psalm 7:9, 26:2; Jeremiah 11:20, 17:10; I Thessalonians 2:4). All our sins come "from within, out of the heart of man" (Mark 7:21). God knows a man's heart (Acts 1:24, 15:8; Luke 16:15, Romans 8:27, Revelation 2:23). No wonder then that the speaker in Proverbs 23:26 asks his son to give him his heart, for once that heart has been captured, so will all else in a person's life follow. What a man is in his heart will influence all his works. If that heart is fully committed to God (*all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength*), one's works will direct him in the service of God. If another loyalty has captured the heart, one's works will take him into a different direction.

The conclusion to all this is that we do not simply wish to impart intellectual knowledge of the Bible as a book, but the Bible as a religious or spiritual book through which we hear the voice of God. It means to address the hearts of our students, not merely their minds. It is the centre of the students' lives that we must address, not merely their mental outpost.

Now, having defined somewhat the nature of religious knowledge of the Bible and the aim of the book, we must look at the context in which we are to teach this subject. That context is partially peculiar to our local culture and partially universal. The universal aspect concerns the central themes of salvation that need

to be understood in every culture and age. That central message must be understood well by every student not only, but also by every teacher of the subject. For our purposes today, I assume that all of us know these basic teachings of salvation in the depths of our hearts.

In addition to this universal centre, there are certain elements that are, at least in their combination, peculiar to our own context. An important aspect of that context are the demands or expectations of both students and government of our educational process. Most people want their children to get an education because certificates and diplomas are the main way to success these days, success being defined in a very worldly way. The concern of student and parent is not first of all true knowledge and understanding so much as getting paper qualifications. Dr. J. Pleudemann of ECWA/SIM used to refer to the “diploma disease.” Only what will appear on the examination interests the students. They merely wish to pass on to the next stage of education, for each new stage means a higher level of power and wealth later on. And if this way to the top means they have to take Bible Knowledge, well, they will take it in stride as just another hurdle to overcome. So, give them the facts of the Bible that will be on the exam and do not bother them with anything else. Even some Christian schools give in to that demand. Just a couple of days ago a BK teacher in a top Christian school of this state was told by his principal to stick to the Bible facts so students can pass their exams. That’s what it’s all about.

Another element in the context is the demands of the government. Its demands are several, if I understand the situation correctly. First, it also wants an emphasis on facts and examinations. The Bible must be taught like science: impersonal, factual, objective. Secondly, the government expects that BK will instill a sense of loyalty and obedience to the government and a sense of cooperation. This goes back a long ways to the early days of colonialism when the government demanded from missions that they teach the people to obey the colonial government and help break down suspicion and hostility. Thirdly, the government expects that BK will produce a sense of morality in the students. Students must learn the rules for moral living.

Another element of our context is the moral state of our society. Only yesterday a journalist described our society as morally bankrupt. I am not about to assess the truth of this claim. However, we do live without any doubt in an age of selfishness, oppression, corruption and injustice at every level of society. Now Nigeria is not peculiar in this, of course. However, in our country that means at the moment that the rich and powerful, whether in business, politics, professions or education, are getting more rich and powerful, while the ordinary man is suffering from an increasingly oppressive system. Most of you know how the villager gets cheated out of his fertilizers, his tractor service, his chicks, his medicine – out of everything. Bribery and corruption have become so common that even church leaders just shrug their shoulders in indifference and unbelief. Many feel we should just learn to live with it and make the best of it – without giving any thought to the Bible’s message about it.

Well, we have summarized certain elements of the context in which we all work and in which you teach Bible. They question is now: how do we teachers go about our task in that context? How are we to react to the demands of student and government? And what about injustice and corruption among us?

As to the demands of student and government, we can quite easily expose the fallacy of their demands on their own grounds. Science requires that every field of investigation be studied in terms that do justice to the phenomena peculiar to the field or discipline. One does not study economics as if it were chemistry, though no doubt there may be some relationships. One does not study history as if it were mathematics, though the disciplines may have a common point where they intersect. Similarly, the Bible must be studied according to its own nature and demands. It cannot be treated *primarily* like chemistry or history or literature.

Well, then, the Bible cannot be taught simply to pass objective examinations or examinations that demand essay answers that are objective and free from all religious elements. The Bible is designed to address us directly in our hearts and if you ignore that, you may be teaching some true things about the Bible, but you are not addressing yourself to its central concern. Then you are not only unbiblical, but also unscientific and unacademic. And that surely is the greatest sin

a teacher or student can commit in our modern day! There is nothing wrong with passing examinations, but these examinations must be designed so that they do justice to the subject material. When these exams are patterned after other fields of learning, then these exams are not scientific and must be changed. Each subject, including BK, must have the freedom to be taught and examined according to the nature of the subject itself. That is demanded of every other subject. Why should BK constitute an exception to this rule and policy? I believe that the *churches and the association of BK teachers should together influence policy makers so as to change the nature of BK exams in order to free the subject matter from all restraints foreign to it.*

As to the expectation that BK will produce a sense of obedience and respect, that is no doubt a legitimate expectation. However, when that obedience is meant to be unconditional and constitutes unquestioning obedience to authorities who themselves are often lawless, then the question of obedience and respect becomes more complicated. Biblical obedience and respect are reserved first of all for God. When authorities exercise their power justly, even if they are not Christian, we must teach obedience and respect for them. But when these authorities trample upon the elementary human rights and become oppressive, cheat, lie, bribe, misgovern and use their positions for their own ends, then we must take a good look at what the Bible teaches and what we ourselves ought to teach. *It was a Christian pastor who first stated that Christianity is being used as opiate for the people.* This was during the 19th century in Great Britain when the church also taught workers to obey their masters, while their masters did not obey God in their dealings with their workers. In such a context the Gospel becomes indeed opiate or is used as such.

However, the Bible is very clear that Christians have the *right* not only to protest and oppose what is unjust and corrupt, but even an *obligation*. I refer you to passages such as Isaiah 1:23, 3:14-15, 10:14; Amos 6:1-7, Micah 3:1-4; Daniel 3:13-18; Exodus 1:15-22, 2:1-5; Hebrews 11:23-28. The Bible calls a spade a spade. Kings and rulers who oppressed are called thieves and robbers in the same way Jesus called religious leaders white-washed sepulchers. They are challenged, denounced and warned in no uncertain terms even though it is all hidden under

cloaks of politeness. The Bible calls upon us to “open our mouths” for those who are not able to cope (Proverbs 31:8-9). I refer you to Chapter 4 of *Living in God’s World* for Biblical details here. (A publication of the Institute of Church and Society, Northern Area Office.)

BK teaching must help instill this prophetic passion, concern and courage in the student. It is a very prominent element in the Bible, in the New Testament (Luke 1:51-58, 4:18) as well as in the Old Testament. It is very strange that Christians have seldom recognized the urgency in which these concerns are expressed in the Bible, but it is an element of the Gospel that is very badly needed today as a corrective to present destructive and oppressive social trends. Here is an area where we must make the student understand the Gospel concretely and instill a prophetic passion that will undercut the present drive for getting more and more at the expense of our neighbour. That prophetic passion cannot be instilled if the subject is geared to scientific examinations foreign to the nature of the subject matter. It will render the Bible itself powerless and its contents will not be understood. And surely it cannot be the purpose of education to leave the student ignorant of the basic issue in any given discipline! *The demands of governments, teachers and students are unrealistic, unscientific and contradictory.*

There is another contradictory element in the government’s demands. They want BK to instill a sense of morality and they want this done in a course that is geared to examinations that do not fit the nature of the subject. The Bible itself teaches that man is by nature not capable of reaching any high moral level, for he is trapped in his own sinfulness. This becomes even more difficult in an age when all traditional restraints have disappeared. Morals flourish best on a religious base of a renewed heart and mind. Without the power of the Holy Spirit, according to the Bible, you cannot produce a majority of moral people, certainly not a moral society. Again we run into the obstacle of inherently self-contradictory demands. The basic textbook of BK teaches that the government’s expectations cannot be met under present policies.

Nigeria wishes to develop and grow quickly. It is on the run. Yet, a recent survey of the International Labour Organization has revealed that the vast majority of our

citizens are going backward economically, while a small class of elites make some progress, at least economically. Development is not taking place as was expected. Why is that? Because we do not have the skills or the money? No, it is our mentality that prevents our country from making progress. If people do not strive for peace and justice, then other aspects of a society will not progress either.

I believe that the secret to true and just development lies in religion in general and, especially, in the Christian religion. The Bible insists on justice and fairness, on reasonable distribution of property, on compassion, on sacrificing and giving oneself in the service of God and man. Few of these are present in our society. Sooner or later some politician(s) will arise and take advantage of the lop-sided situation by promising freedom to the poor and the poor will listen. It happens in many countries where there is social unrest and injustice. And often these politicians only use the poor for their own ends only to create new oppressive conditions. Teachers of BK can help forestall this by teaching Biblical notions of righteousness and justice and by teaching such concerns with urgency. In this way, *BK can become a most crucial subject for the development of our nation. You can become a key to true development and revolution in the name of Jesus. It is up to you, whether you yourself are a wide-awake and sensitive Christian or just another dull money-hungry member of the elite.*