

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND EVANGELISM

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Introduction

I believe many of you know already that Dean M. Kelley, one of the U.S. National Council of Churches leaders, who is a Methodist minister, recently published an extremely interesting book called, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (1972). This analyzes the churches of the United States and presents their problems from the standpoint of religious sociology. This book points out the fact that the ecumenical churches have been rapidly decreasing in membership, while attendance of evangelical churches, on the other hand, has been growing.

For example, the Southern Baptist Convention grew by 2.26 per cent per annum; the Christian Reformed by 2.2 per cent; and the Assemblies of God by 2.1 per cent, respectively. One of the important reasons is that the ecumenical churches opened the door to dialogue, leniency, diversity, and relativism.

On the other hand, the author observes that the evangelical churches are practicing "strictness" in the teaching of doctrine, in the matter of requirements for baptism, and in church discipline. Now, the practice of such a "strictness" seems to be closely related with the matter of "authority" in faith. Peter Berger, a religious sociologist, rightly suggests that the fundamental cause for the decline of the churches today lies in the loss of authority.

Now, I believe, it is appropriate to take up the subject of "Biblical Authority" as the first session of this Congress. I'd like to consider the subject initially from the aspect of general revelation of God — then proceed to relate it to the view of the Bible.

Never has there been such an age as today when "authority" sounds hollow. Never has there been such an age as today when "authority" is fundamentally questioned. Claims have been made — even in the church — as follows: "This world is destined to dip and fall into chaos, so that the light of God is not even found in it." "God's revelation comes through our neighbor." Or, "Today, almost nothing is known about the historical Jesus." Another claim is, "Since the Bible as a whole is an ancient myth, we must demythologize it and translate it into the words and thinking of modern man." As we see these claims being made in the church, we must make sure once again that we have the clear understanding and confidence when it comes to "biblical authority," the foundation of faith and evangelism.

1. General revelation and evangelism

Today, an accurate understanding of God's general revelation is an important factor in formulating the theory of evangelism. Currently there are three different views: (i) that all religions are partially enlightened by the light of God's revelation. With this emphasis, rejecting the claim of the absoluteness of Christianity, it aims at a universal

world religion. (ii) That revelation comes only through Christ, and that nature, reason, and history do not convey the light of revelation at all. (iii) That natural man is still able to lead man to true knowledge of God — though incomplete — by the light of his own reason or nature. How should we consider the subject of general revelation in the area of evangelism?

a. *Possibility of the knowledge of God by the natural man.* According to Psalm 19:1-6, the light of God is shown to all the people just as the benefit of the sun covers all the people of the earth. Romans 1:20 says, "For the invisible things of (God) from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead." Both Roman Catholicism and a certain segment of the evangelical churches — by means of direct appeal to Romans 1:20 — conclude that even the natural man can come to the true knowledge of God. If it is true, it means that we in Japan (a country full of paganism) can easily teach the triune God of the Bible without too much difficulty simply by adding Christ on top of the national view of gods and then pouring the Holy Spirit on them. Is it really true?

Romans 1:18 ff. testify that the natural man is not only surrounded by the light of the general revelation of God, but — simultaneously — he is trying to hold back the light "in unrighteousness" (v. 18). In other words, he is trying hard to suppress the light and dispel the light. And the wrath of God is revealed on such a natural man.

Furthermore, practically, "his foolish heart was darkened" (v. 21) and "he worshipped and served corruptible man, birds, beasts, and creeping things more than the Creator" (vs. 22, 23, 25). Here, the natural man — though being confronted with the light of God's revelation — has not reached the point of discovering the true God because of his sin; but has actually fallen into an illusion of idolatry. This has been pointed out by Paul, a man of rich experience in evangelism. As a matter of fact, Japan might serve as an illustration to prove that point. Anything from the sun, the Emperor, feudal lords, a mountain, river, monkey (the Sanno god), dove (the Hachiman god), deer (the Kasuga god), fox (the Inari god), and even the "salt heating pan" (a Shiogama shrine) — as well as mentally abnormal persons — have been worshiped as gods; and people have served them. A lukewarm attitude against the power of paganism will not make evangelism fruitful.

Another thing I have learned from the recent experience of evangelism is the anti-Christian and the Satanic nature which is expressed by the natural man's reasoning. The reasoning of natural man works and is based on its own presuppositions, and this reasoning is diametrically opposed to Christian presuppositions.

The primary presuppositions of the natural man are: (i) man does not recognize any authority that stands over him; and (ii) this world is ultimately a "chance-controlled" world which is basically irrationalistic. And based upon these presuppositions, man with his natural reasoning is actually saying, "Curse to the Lord." This we have to remember.

Under such circumstances, in an effort to seek contact with unbelievers for the purpose of winning them for the Lord, if we allow any compromise with the natural man, this amounts to digging the grave of the evangelist.

Today, the conversion experience (*metanoia*) is not regarded as merely an emotional thing or the matter of will, but as the conversion of the whole man, including his reasoning, which is under the serious effect of sin. Unless we reconfirm this definition, we will not see the realization of deep-rooted evangelism in a true sense of the word. The fact that we in Japan have so many so-called "Christians" who have "graduated" has a definite relationship to these situations.

b. *"Image of God" and God's common grace.* The cognitive nature of the natural man is — as has been said previously — "ignorance" and "darkness" (see Gal. 4:8; I Thess. 4:5; II Thess. 1:8). Romans 2:14-15 teaches that the things contained in the law of God are written in their hearts and that their conscience is also bearing witness of it.

We are seeing "man's dehumanizing acts against man" in every area of present-day society. Because of the avarice for wealth, a man destroys himself and his fellow workers as if nothing were the matter. However, Paul claimed that — even in such a state — man is confronted with the light of God's general revelation at the depth of his existence and in the midst of social activities.

As we study this subject, we come to notice two things that the Bible is saying: (i) God created man in his own image (Gen. 1:27); and (ii) God is giving all the people of the world his preserving grace (Acts 17:25b). Paul here seems to be saying that with the law and conscience written in the hearts of men, "the image of God" is preserved even now. Then, how shall we understand the import of his description?

Generally, man is different from all other creatures — sinner or not; that is, a man is absolutely unique (Psalm 8). Man is a sinner; he is a being with rational power. Another aspect is the consciousness of his responsibility to respond to his Creator; that is, a man knows the law of God in one way or another. Thus, he is in a position to become aware of responsibility. Therefore man is protected from falling into a completely unlawful state, morally and socially.

According to Ruth Benedict, the Japanese culture is said to be the "Culture of Shame." In it also, that which makes a man a human being is preserved in some form. Talk about nihilism is being spread today into the daily lives of the public. But the Christian churches must rightly realize that morality, responsibility to social justice, community awareness, and the pursuit of humanism are made possible because of the "image of God" as well as God's preserving grace. At the same time, we must have a clear conviction as we stand at the place of evangelism that God keeps on loving us even now without giving up this world (John 3:16; Col. 1:17).

2. Relationship between the Gospel and other religions

When it comes to the question of the relationship between the Gospel and other religions, it is an extremely difficult question for the churches of Asia and Africa for the following reasons:

- (i) The extension of communication and the worldwide exchange of ideas have been promoting mutual contact among various religions.
- (ii) Ecumenical theology, which strongly emphasizes the dialogue

and cooperation with other religions, is heading toward a syncretistic world religion, somewhat similar to that which was advocated by Toynbee.

(iii) The "indigenous theology" in the Third World is headed toward universalism from the standpoint of "Bible only" and "Christ only"; and this trend is making the issue more complicated.

Paul's address at Areopagus (Acts 17) gives us necessary guiding principles concerning this subject. *First*, according to Acts 17:22, Paul considers faith and religiousness of the Greek as a clue to evangelism. There, Paul saw the "Seed of Religion," "God awareness" (Calvin calls it), as an element of God's image; and he seems to have taken it as a contact point for evangelism. *Second*, Paul evaluated their faith and religion as one of "ignorance" (v. 23); and it is important to note that he calls them to repentance and conversion from the ignorance of verse 30 (see Acts 26:18). Such a clear-cut point of view is seen even at Lystra, and it is typical of Paul (Acts 14:14 ff). *Third*, through verses 24-29, Paul is proclaiming God as the Creator and Ruler of the world. In the past, it was viewed that Paul was affirming common ground for both the Gospel and the Greek religion in the matter of monotheism. Such a view has been adopted in actual evangelism.

However, if you consider the following points, it becomes doubtful that Paul actually held such a view. (i) The God of the Bible was unknown to the Greek, Paul claimed. (ii) Paul's address was based upon the Old Testament and the revelation he received from the Risen Lord. That is, "God that made the world and all things therein" (v. 24) is virtually the quotation from Exodus 20:11 and is found repeatedly in the Bible. "Lord of heaven and earth . . ." that "dwelleth not in temples made with hands . . ." is the reflection of I Kings 8:27 and is strongly emphasized by Stephen in Acts 7:48. (iii) The Greek view of the cosmos in those days was *monism* and was based upon the concept of cosmos as basically one. It is entirely different from the evangelical view of cosmos where the Creator and the creatures are basically different. Of this, Paul was evidently fully aware.

Paul's faith in the Creator-God was not contradictory to his faith in resurrection. But we have to remember that the resurrection was not acceptable to those who were listening to Paul (vs. 31-33).

When man as a human being in his fallen state loses sight of the Revelation of the true God, then man's religious imagination will eventually end up either in blending God and nature (as is the case with the gods in Shintoism), or he will end up blending God and self (as is the case with self-deification in Buddhism).

3. Bible and evangelism

a. *The Bible is most necessary.* So far, we have touched on a few points concerning general revelation and evangelism. My next point will show you that general revelation is insufficient and that the Bible, which is the written revelation, is "most necessary." (The first paragraph of the Westminster Confession)

- (i) Concerning the misery of self and God's salvation through

Christ, man does not have any other way but the Word of God (II Tim. 3:17, "Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 3").

(ii) I Kings 20:28 illustrates the case of a man without the light of God's special revelation. When he is attracted by nature with its fascinating and terrifying aspects, he tends to be led to nature worship. And he may listen to the "harmony of spheres" claimed by Pythagoras; still he interprets it according to his premises and does not reach the point of discovering the true God and the true meaning of his creation.

(iii) The central core of Christian life is to believe in the eternal promises of God (Romans 4:3). Abraham and those who were living in those days were led to take it through the direct revelation of God.

Today, our faith is not based upon anything like "I feel" or "I think." In reality, it is possible for us to know it only through the testimony of the promise of God contained in the Bible.

(iv) The driving force of renewal and reform of the church which is sought for in each era is the Word of God, as Psalm 119:50 indicates. Amos 8:11 tells us that "the failure to listen to the Word of the Lord" meant death to Israel.

b. *Evangelical approach to the Bible.* The greatest point at issue for Christianity — the dividing point of every issue — is the Bible. That is because the Bible alone is the only source of information.

Today, the most popular method to determine the view of the Bible is to submit the Bible to the so-called "scientific examination of the experts" and then to abide by that testimony — to judge the Bible by the standards of whether modern man thinks it relevant for his day. In other words, precisely speaking, the Bible is subjected to man's assessment.

On the contrary, the fundamental characteristic of evangelical approach is the *self-testimony* of the Bible — the first priority over any other consideration. Even in the legal world, testimony to oneself ought not be ruled out as improper. If he is not a swindler — and if he testifies to truth — a man has a right to be heard.

As Ramm indicated, if the appearance of the Bible is simply the extension of the mode of God's revelational activity, the attitude of man as a creature should be, "I will listen; Lord, speak to me." And to establish a mediator between God who speaks and us should be considered a Satanic concept (Job. 9:32-33).

Furthermore, as Young pointed out, if the Bible is not trusted when it testifies of itself, how and where can we find the guarantee that the Bible is to be trusted when it speaks of other things, such as salvation by Christ or the Great Commission for world evangelization?

c. *The Bible as the Word of God.* From the very beginning of the church, the people of God have been confessing that the Bible is the trustworthy Word of God — and the only criterion of faith and practice. The basis of this confession has been regarded as the work called the "inspiration" of God the Holy Spirit.

Today, there is a theory that "inspiration" related to the central thought of the Bible writers. Others say that the inspiration is the existential illumination that readers have. Furthermore, there are those who emphasize greatly the humanistic aspect of inspiration.

The Bible says, "It is breathed by God" — (the product of the creative breath of God — "*theopneustos*" of II Tim. 3:16). Bible writers were "carried along" by the Holy Spirit and they wrote (II Pet. 1:16 "*pheromenoi*").

The lips of our Lord himself testified to the authority and trustworthiness of the Bible (Matt. 5:18; John 10:35). Today, in many liberal churches, we see the phenomenon of the "disappearance of the Holy Spirit." Then it is by no means by chance that the works of the Holy Spirit — including inspiration and regeneration — have been rationally reinterpreted in the modern churches.

I believe that, under such circumstances — before liberals talk about inspiration — there is one thing that they seriously question on the subject of the Bible; namely, the faith in the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

In recent discussions, the subject of the authority of the Bible and its role in evangelism is the one about which there has been much confusion. The WCC Bangkok Conference held last year on "Salvation Today" revealed it very clearly. There the Bible was viewed by many as merely a collection of human witness to the experiences of the so-called "mode of life with true humanness." Along with this a strongly humanistic and socialistic view of the church's mission was adopted. It should be noted that behind such a trend, there is a great influence of "political theology" which is trying to make *social change* — and not the Bible — the foundation of everything.

As Zahrnt pointed out, society is the factor that determines everything. And as Schaeffer indicated, the church is full of "the theology of the echo of this world."

In the early church, the Christians were changing the world. But now the world is turning the church upside down and throwing it into confusion. This is a fact.

As we consider seriously that we are "God's remnant," sent to the suffering world where signs of the last day are evident, once again we must humble ourselves before God and give heed to the truth expressed in the words of Christ's high priestly prayer: "Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth" (John 17:17).