

The Law and Promise Hermeneutic in a Postmodern Context

The main reason Ed, Marie, and I were in South Africa two weeks ago was the International Association of Mission Studies conference. Every three or four years missionaries, professors and students of missiology and other interested persons from around the world gather to learn from each other about Christian mission that's happening around the globe. IAMS is an ecumenical group that got started in the early 70s with Europeans, for the most part, but has since attracted folks from every continent.

The theme of this year's conference held at Hammanskraal outside of Pretoria was "Reflecting Jesus Christ: Crucified and Living in a Broken World." We participated in exposure groups, plenary sessions and mission study groups all of which focussed on this theme.

Today I'd like to share my experience of the mission study group I participated in. Our topic was "Bible in Mission: Rediscovering Christ Crucified and Living: Biblical Hermeneutics" which was led by Dr. Teresa Okure of Nigeria. As we began our work together, Dr. Okure emphasized two points. First, the Bible and its reading is life in ever changing social locations and these changing locations make different readings of the same text, even by the same reader, not only possible but inevitable. Secondly, because the goal of Christian mission (according to Dr. Okure) is "to gather into one God's scattered children", readings of the Bible in mission would need to foster individual and community building in multi-cultural social locations.

We started our work together, after introductions, by looking at the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:1-12 with the intention of getting to several other parables (we never did). Dr. Okure encouraged us to share or develop new ways of reading from different perspectives and social locations. Being a highly educated group, the first go-round showed, primarily, where or what we had studied: historical-critical method, narrative models of interpretation, etc. As we became more comfortable with each other, a multiplicity of "readings" began to emerge. We realized that social location is a complex set of circumstances that include ethnicity, language, geography, denomination, confessional stance, generational concerns, education, economics and a host of other factors that we kept peeling back, looking for a center to stand on together.

It was a frustrating experience in some ways and, at times, acrimonious. Having fifteen leaders in a room, even when they agree on the subject matter is difficult enough, since all fifteen are used to being in charge. When they don't all agree and yet feel passionately about the subject, the atmosphere can get a bit heated. At dinner after one such session, Ed and I talked about whether or not the law and promise hermeneutic that we both espouse had any place in this postmodern cacophony. Was this Lutheran way of viewing Scripture and the world merely a relic of "Enlightenment hegemonic thinking?" Over brai (that's Afrikaans for bar-b-q) and beer (how can you do Lutheran theology without beer?) seven statements emerged that pulled our far-ranging discussions into a law and promise framework.

Since the next session was our last day together and each mission study group was responsible to come up with a short report for the plenary about our efforts, I offered these seven statements as a starting point for this report. After much debate and some small changes in wording, the group accepted the statements as our report to the plenary with the inclusion of an

introductory paragraph to highlight our methodological process.

So, after all that, I offer to you the report of the Bible in Mission group:

Through our reflection on the parable of the Sower in Matthew 13:1-23, we discovered the rich variety of our backgrounds which helps us learn from each other as well as disagree about our own interpretations of the text. Difficulties emerged in struggling with the pain of life and our differences in approaching the text. However, even these difficulties (semantic, cultural and confessional) helped us learn from one another (even through our own resistance) and offered us an exciting and life giving experience of interacting with other Christians. As a result of all this, we offer seven statements for reflection on Bible study in an ecumenical, multi-cultural context:

- 1. Reflecting Jesus Christ: Crucified and Living is also an axiom for doing Bible study.*
- 2. RJCCCL (his life, message, cross and resurrection) is a fundamental criterion for understanding various interpretations of Biblical texts.*
- 3. Among Christians there is diversity about what constitutes responsible (and less-than-responsible) interpretation of Biblical texts. Part of this responsibility is being accountable to "the other."*
- 4. These differences, however, need not discourage us. For the NT itself illustrates how this criterion was used by the authors of the texts of the NT. So ecumenical, multi-cultural study of this criterion as used in the NT is promising. This applies both to the use made of OT texts in NT documents, and to the interpretation of Jesus himself by NT authors.*
- 5. NT authors lived in a multi-cultural world, as we do, and*

had to discover how the proclamation of the crucified and living Lord takes root and grows within the rich variety of humankind.

- 6. Because the crucified and living Christ heals humankind's brokenness with God, therefore the power of this truth through the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives empowers Christ's people to daring ventures as "wounded healers" in our own broken world(s) today.*
- 7. Christian unity as the crucified and living Christ's wounded healers is not cultural uniformity. The liturgical, ecclesial, pastoral, educational, etc. practices of churches in various parts of the world will be culturally sensitive as they center their lives around Christ, crucified and living, in their own mission(s) to the broken world.*

Robin J. Morgan

18 Feb 2000