Faith and Historical-Critical Pursuits in Teaching

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To Believe … or to be Honest?

When I was in Grade 12 at Rockway Mennonite Collegiate in Kitchener, Ontario, one of my teachers dedicated three days to introducing critical issues with regard to the Bible and Christian faith. I recall him saying something like, "I would like your faith to be grounded in something other than naïve Sunday school understandings."

I was impressed with what he said – and shaken to my core. Although I do not recall now any of the specifics, I do remember being surprised and startled, even shocked, by what he said on those days. It seemed that in my upbringing and church experience, I had not been told the whole story! My great-grandfather, grandfather, and father were all preachers, and I had grown up in the Mennonite Church. But here it felt like I was being invited to think critically about faith-related issues for the first time. Why had I not been told these things before? It was disturbing. Although my teacher did a good job of stimulating my critical thought, he was not gifted with a pastoral approach to the subject matter. I quickly concluded that I had but one choice: to be a Christian, or to be honest. It did not take long to conclude that I must at least be honest. So I rejected my faith, and entered Goshen College as an agnostic.

As a mathematics major, it was not long until I had to take one of the required Bible courses. So I took Old Testament the second semester. The professor was Stanley C. Shenk, who had his PhD in American fiction. He was schooled in the inductive Bible study method propagated by the New York Biblical Seminary and was a local pastor.

Soon we came to the flood narrative in Genesis. As I recall, Shenk identified eleven different critical problems with reading the story literally. For instance, biophysicists had calculated that if indeed "all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered; the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep" (Gen. 7:19-20), all living plants and trees at the normal sea level would be killed – crushed by 14,000

pounds per square inch of pressure from all of the water. So when all of the water receded, the earth's plant life, needed to support its animal life, would no longer be living!

Shenk then proceeded to consider several possible answers to each of the eleven critical problems. One answer to the above problem was that perhaps for all the hyperbole in the story, the flood was more localized and did not actually involve pouring more than a billion cubic miles of extra water on the earth at the remarkable rate of more than 6 inches of rainfall per minute (30 feet per hour) for 40 days straight! Another possible answer was that if God created everything in the first place, why couldn't God do it again? Here again – this time in college – I was encountering both problems and possible explanations that I had never heard or considered before. And again I was intrigued. But this time I was studying with someone who brought a pastoral concern for his students into the classroom.

Although my thinking and intellectual curiosity were clearly piqued by Shenk in his classes, what made the biggest impression on me was the spirit with which he introduced and addressed critical problems. On the one hand, like my high school teacher, he did not avoid them or pretend as though they did not matter. Unfortunately, this is exactly what the church historically has done with critical issues – and what the Mennonite church continues to do, for the most part: avoid them or pretend as though they do not matter. On the other hand, Shenk was not fearful of those questions. I never got the impression that we were in danger of asking the wrong question – some unknown question that was so dangerous it might bring down the faith like a big house of cards. Nor was he afraid to discover an answer to one of those dangerous questions that might be even more dangerous. This was hugely important for me, given my high school experience. Shenk was confident in his faith and in the rightness of using our minds to think through issues, so far as the limitations of our created minds would permit. He considered critical thinking about life, about God, and about the Bible as a way of loving God with all one's mind.

This was refreshing and deeply encouraging to me. It brought healing to my soul. Ever since then, I have wondered why the church has been so slow to look truth in the eye. In time I found biblical studies so intriguing that I switched my major to Bible, Religion, and Philosophy. I took as many

courses from Shenk as I could. As a teacher of the Bible myself, I have tried to emulate him in his open-eyed embrace of difficult questions in the context of faith, and I have grown in my conviction that it is possible to be both honest and Christian at the same time.

Later in college I encountered a professor who was more like my high school teacher. He had a reputation for entering a freshman Bible class and saying, "The sooner you learn that Matthew didn't write Matthew, Mark didn't write Mark, Luke didn't write Luke, and John didn't write John, the better!" This was understandably disturbing to students, and it was not long before he was let go by the college. It seems that he too had little inclination – or perhaps giftedness – in reorientation, in connecting or reconnecting critical thought with personal faith.

In 1988-1989 I happened to mention to one of the persons in the church I was attending that I planned to begin a PhD program in New Testament the following year. The church was West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship, and the person was Christopher Melchert, who at the time was working on his PhD in Islam at the University of Pennsylvania. (He is currently a Fellow in Arabic at Pembroke College, University of Oxford.) Christopher expressed both surprise and incredulity that I as a Christian could undertake a PhD program in the scriptures of my own religion! Wouldn't my critical scholarship necessarily compromise my faith … or vice versa? As a Christian himself he would not be faced with such questions in studying Islam.

The Nature of Learning

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer calls teaching and learning a journey of the heart. There is something irreducibly personal about learning. As Palmer puts it, "Teaching … emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse."[1] To be sure, there is a kind of rote memory learning that is not very personal, but learning that matters is learning that touches on who we are, how we imagine our place in this world, and what we value. Learning is ultimately about shaping and reshaping a worldview that puts us in a proper relationship with God and with the rest of God's creation.

Because of the personal nature of teaching and learning, there is no such thing as "mastery" in pedagogy, apart from being genuine as a person and persistent in one's own learning approach to life. One can achieve technical

mastery in various aspects of teaching, but technique is never enough. The best teachers never "arrive"; instead, they continue to embrace the journey. Our capacity to learn is inevitably affected by what is going on in our lives – how invested we are in the subject matter, and how comfortable we are with opening ourselves to it and with making ourselves vulnerable.

True learning changes a person. Learning gives a person power. And yes, there are many stories about how this or that nice young Christian went off to college and there rejected his or her faith. Knowledge is power, and power is capable of making people more effective in their defensiveness. But knowledge and power can also be put into the service of God's reign. I know of seasoned Christians in the church who pleaded with their grandchildren not to go even to a Christian college, fearing that if they did they would change. More often than not, they did change. Learning does that.

Orientation, Disorientation, and Reorientation

At AMBS I regularly teach "Canon and Community," which focuses on the writing, preserving, transmitting, canonizing, and translating of the Scriptures throughout history. I also teach an introductory course called "Reading the Bible." The course is part survey and part introduction to critical methodologies in biblical studies. For many students, these courses are a stretch because they had never been encouraged to think critically about the Bible in their churches. Some were educated to think critically in university, but not to take their faith seriously or to think of critical scholarship as a tool in God's reign.

So, students come to seminary without much inclination or ability to ask questions about the historical reliability of certain Jesus sayings or to explore how the ancient near Eastern mythologies might inform our reading of the Genesis creation narratives. Both of these courses have significant potential for disorienting students. Our students are diverse anyway. Some come convinced that questioning any straightforward, literal reading of a text is both wrong and dangerous. Others are convinced that only literal readings can be right or faithful. Still others come wondering whether faith itself has any integrity. Most are somewhere between these positions. Given that learning is so personal and that the journeys of our students are so different, it sometimes amazes me that we can make any real progress of the type that matters in our classes.

A number of people have worked with the idea of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation as the basic pattern of life. Paul Ricoeur claimed that Jesus' parables were so memorable and poignant because they typically led a listener on the orientation-disorientation-reorientation journey.[2] Walter Brueggemann has used this same schema in his typological identification of the Psalms.[3]

Students in my "Reading the Bible" course who are most profoundly affected by it are not those who have learned "new facts." Rather, they are those who were disoriented by their learning. They struggled with the critical approach to biblical studies because they felt that a world to which they had long clung was passing out of existence before their very eyes. But they eventually embraced a new world – a new way of making sense of the Bible through the eyes of faith. Hope, despair, and resistance all normally come into play in students' experience of this course. As David Clines puts it, "It is only when that newness meets the human person or community convincingly that an abandonment of the old orientation may be fully affirmed."[4]

Disorientation is naturally and inevitably disturbing. I can imagine no way of teaching this course that avoids the dangerous territory of questioning one's faith. Disorientation is unbearable when it is accompanied by significant fear or mistrust. It is most bearable when students feel just safe enough (psychologically, spiritually, socially, etc.) in the midst of their disorientation to give themselves permission to be disoriented for a time.

In the midst of their disorientation, modeling can offer brief stabilization. If students are able to recognize that others have gone on this same disorienting journey and have maintained faith as they came out the other side, they are encouraged to think that perhaps they can too. As I recognized that Stanley Shenk was not threatened by the "hard" questions of biblical studies, I too gained the courage to follow questions wherever they might go. This underscores the importance of ethos in teaching: the greater the credibility that teachers are able to gain with their students, the greater the disorientation the students will be able to sustain, and the more profound reorientation they will be able to achieve.

Isaiah's comments on the Suffering Servant as teacher in Isaiah 50 have long intrigued me. Isaiah begins with the pronouncement, "The Lord

God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word" (v. 4a-d). But he says nothing more about speaking or the pastoral goals of teaching; he focuses rather on listening: "Morning by morning he wakens – wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear" (vv. 4e-5a). The teacher is first and foremost a learner (the real meaning of scholar). Just as intriguing, Isaiah then moves from listening to a posture of vulnerability: "I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting" (vv. 5b-6). Speaking, offering pastoral care, listening (well), always being open to learn more, and being vulnerable are the five things Isaiah associates with teaching. It is as if he knew that teaching is, at its best, a personal matter.

It is asking a lot of a course – and of professors – to teach basic Bible content and critical methodologies all while deconstructing and constructing new worlds and offering some limited form of pastoral care to students. Incoming students are increasingly diverse, not only in their knowledge of the Bible but in their journey with faith, their level of comfort with ambiguities in life, and their capacity to tolerate disorientation.

Temptations of a Teacher

Sometimes I am tempted to shortchange the necessary and personal journey of orientation-disorientation-reorientation. Sometimes I get frustrated when students hear things that I did not say – or do not hear what I thought I said. Sometimes I just wish I could control what they heard! But ludicrous as that thought is, it misses the fact that each student must participate individually in the corporate responsibility and opportunity of making sense of life – and of the Bible.

Another temptation is to take the easy way out and not care. It costs to care. How much easier it would be just to be satisfied with delivering the content, assigning grades, and being done with it. Easier, yes. But meaningful, fulfilling, satisfying? No. Our trust as teachers is too precious for that!

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Morning by morning he wakens—
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to listen as those who are taught.
The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
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and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.

Notes

[1] Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 2.

[2] Paul Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia 4* (1975): 29-148, esp. 114-24; cf. also "Religion and Faith" in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of his Work*, ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 234-35; Paul Tournier, "Two Movements," in *A Place for You* (London: SCM Press, 1968), 97-111; David J. A. Clines, *The Poetical Books; The Biblical Seminar, no. 41; A Sheffield Reader* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 40-42; and Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1982), 46-48.

[3] See Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

[4] Clines, *The Poetical Books*, 42.

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