

Chapter 10

Changes from What to What?

Introduction: Maybe I've assumed too much of you, the reader, with the book title, and the way I've developed the chapters. I was hopeful that you could feel the tension between the references I made of my rearing, my educational background, and how perspectives have been refined, redefined, somewhat to give you the sense that I have done some mind changing along the way. And, that mind changing is not necessarily something that has happened in a sequential, punctiliar way.

I might be accused of attempting a mini-memoir approach with the introductions. Just in case you've had that thought, the memoir approach is not what I've had in mind.

The idea of life stories, though, began to dawn on me as good ways to get to know students—hear their stories--as well as prime the pump of discussion and research with some of my own. As well, some of my mind changing during my active classroom days came through conversations with students particularly outside the classroom settings. There were commonalities here and there about our lives, cultural contexts, educational backgrounds. Generalities began to form so that I recognized themes that were in Scripture that matched up with life stories, all our life stories.

For me realizing that the overview and review of one's life can give some shape to progression and regression of one's sense of living was enlivening. Life illustrations had traction with students much better than with generalized, and especially embellished, ideas.

One would think that lessons would be learned by each succeeding generation on these areas in the previous chapters, and we could change the story lines. But still there is the merging of cultural ways lacking spiritual intent of doing things and what gets passed off as Christian worship. Students by their application outside the classroom continued redefining facets of Christian studies, according to their oral traditions of their rearing.

Along with the increasing student population from state schools there was also an increase among students, whether with state or private school backgrounds, of not just a conservatism but a take on culture, other persons, that was egocentric, lacked humility, and in some cases was downright mean. That meant becoming more adept at reading students, not profiling them, but becoming more acquainted with them in their details rather than treating them as a faceless body in a group.

For, those in the larger culture had come to see that "Christian" had become too closely aligned with political platforms that any reference to Christ was only veneer, camouflage, even deception. So, the term that has become more descriptive is that of being a "Jesus follower." Interestingly, the earliest references were that other people called them the people of the Way, and "Christians" because the people of the Way incarnated the teachings of Jesus.

Content-Methods—Adaptations

Gradually it dawned on me that I was identifying with the characters in the New Testament who attempted to convey Gospel, the Good News, the Way of Jesus. Typically, those characters, very much like the prophetic and priestly types in the Old Testament, were usually taking on the role of the minority report with regards to what did it mean to live life after God's ways.

I admit there was an invigoration attached to that dawning, as well as a sense of attempting to hold back an overwhelming wave of civil religion, cultural Christianity. I still have that sense of tension. Out of that stretch, though, came a convergence, not all at once, of matters which needed to be front and center from me as the leader of a class setting.

With that dawning, I found that where I'd considered a somewhat minor dynamic about Christian ethics needed to be more emphasized. That is, the interdisciplinary nature of Christian ethics. One can treat the area like any other academic discipline, do basically descriptive work, or launch with one's own presumptive propositions of what and how Christian ethics should be.

Christian ethics, however, is an intersection, a crossroads, a melding and welding of all of what we can identify as biblical-theological-ethical-cultural layers, concentric circles, interfaces. Only if one had access to a holographic tool to demonstrate all this!

And there is one of the major points with which I identified with the minority report people in Scripture. They were usually people who worked across the categories of their culture(s)—geography, governing principles both internally and externally, theological breadth, and certainly behavioral expectations. They were not reductionist types attempting to find shortcuts to their ends in mind, or the most lucrative route in their practice.

The categories that follow are not quite interchangeable, but are interdisciplinary, or are products of interdisciplinary study. From one perspective, each and all could be considered under one heading. From another perspective, they are interrelated to such a degree that no matter with which one I begin, they find convergence with each of the others.

Conveying a Larger Narrative—

Realizing that one way to read and interpret Scripture was to read the Bible as a collection of stories was helpful. The realization, no doubt, was the product of the several years of my reading the Bible through. I still do that. Each time, I find myself moving a little farther from the proof-texting approach which I grew up on, and around which I developed my first sermons—for those were the models put in front of me.

The proof texting approach is still around us. It shows up from those who talk in terms of memory verses, "my life verse," the phrases from here and there in Scripture crammed together to support an ideology. Mostly the method is short, succinct thoughts thrown out seemingly ready to fit every situation. Perfect for "bumper sticker theology," one-line statements intended to evoke motivation, emotion, being in touch with God.

An expanded approach those folks use is that of dealing with only one theme which they've declared the centerpiece of their biblical-theological-ethical framework. It is usually based on an

assumption that has been bought into the context, and that becomes the hinge point for the rest of Scripture, or at least the few sections which the proclaimer cares to include in her/his canon.

There were some barriers to get through with most students. They had their own selected canon. They were not familiar with realizing the Bible is a rather scattered assortment of literature, some of it put together long after the subjects/characters treated had lived and died. There are points of hyperbole, glossing, perspectives that science and technology have forced another interpretation to be made.

Not always did they have the imagination to consider there is a major narrative going on. It was revelatory for them to consider that Jesus' response of "there is the main commandment and one like it" being a good beginning point for unraveling what could be a rather mysterious set of statements. That is, how does one live the life one has learning the best one can of what leads to a quality of life that is available. How do we follow the guidelines for caring for others, the planet, and oneself, and seeking to learn the best one can about whatever we can experience as transcendence?

For many of them it was news that there is more in Scripture about the here and now, than there and then—as in we must prepare by making a demonstrable decision that insures us life in whatever follows mortality in an existence our imaginations cannot imagine. As for the here and now, too much of it got ignored.

Relevance—

So, to students, and since those days of having students gathered with me, my plea was/is for them to think in terms of applied theology. What do these words, some thousands of years old, have to do with us, now in the twenty-first century? Therein lies the approach of understanding the principles of wisdom that come off the pages of the Testaments that are relevant no matter what the generation of human beings.

Here was another realm of bringing students along to recognize these perennial principles and move out of their oral traditions they'd brought. Those oral traditions were often hollow, vacuous, broad, overgeneralized. I must admit, though, it was a challenge getting students to see those characteristics, much more find ways to replace those contortions and distortions of the Bible, of theology, of Christian character with attitudes and actions befitting the perennial principles in Scripture.

Helping students become more critical in their thinking, but also assisting them toward developing their creative imagination, was part of the regimen toward helping them understand the need for bringing the Scriptural principles into their own contexts. Some of the critical thinking exercises prodded the students at the point of their silo style thinking with which they had grown up and had been educated. Universities still typically organize around departments, in schools, by a hierarchical organizational chart.

A primary question I put to students was how is it that we can understand the inner workings of whatever we can call conscience, character, personality, our minds, to assimilate wisdom of the

ages and bring that into connection with people we know now? Relevance is the term appropriate for us. Relevance to their contexts is the mark of the biblical characters.

Hermeneutics—

The foregoing two subheads are part and parcel of what can be called hermeneutics, the science of interpretation. My first choice for a dissertation topic back in the day was “Hermeneutics and Christian Decision Making.” I built a strong collection of seminary papers toward being some of the skeleton and flesh of a dissertation. In those times, however, began conversations with a denominational agency to which I in a few months joined. The practicalities of doing that original idea of a dissertation faded. Another topic rose to the top, being more functional, dare I say relevant, to the agency job.

But those lessons learned through the seminar papers stayed with me, operated as an encouragement for the rest of my years in academia toward helping students toward principles of biblical interpretation in ways that they could help their parishioners understand and apply the Bible. I think my hermeneutical skills continued to develop each academic year.

Good News is an increasingly expansive concept—

These former subheads each and all contributed to my attempting to understand “Gospel” beyond a few short lines that had been repeated nearly every Sunday in my growing up years. The lining out was essentially Jesus was born, died on the cross, and was raised from the dead on the third day, so that we might be saved.

There was no reference to Jesus’ life and work, how and when he related to people. There was nothing about day-to-day impact of any “saving.” The language of saving souls as the primary goal of any minister tended to overshadow any other discussions. With the continual reading of Scripture, however, there came to me the need for a larger, broader, deeper conceptualization of what it meant to take on or distribute the “Good News.”

My ever-lingering sense of Jesus Christ being the interpretive dynamic for Scripture, especially the New Testament grew. With that principle in mind, I paid more attention to the encounters Jesus had in his peripatetic approach to teaching. There are no two alike. There is never a time that Jesus articulated the way of salvation being those lines I heard in my growing up. People approached Jesus expressing trauma in their lives, sometimes peculiar to them, but also in ways that one could understand there were others in that cultural context like them.

Contemporary ministers have tended to label these people “in sin, and without God.” The negative aspects of the situation get transferred to the respective contemporary context, so that what should be Good News, liberating news for the human soul (mind, heart, body—the whole person) piles on more burden to already to the breaking point of people.

Communication skills, both oral and written—

It wasn't just those who came in with undergraduate majors in some area besides theology, religious studies, biblical studies, but those with those just mentioned majors that pressed me to work on graduate students' reading and writing skills.

For whatever reason, and I'm not going to harangue about their undergraduate school education, their secondary or elementary education, even that they lacked parental support in their formative education years, those students lacked reading and writing skills they needed for ministry work.

Every semester, every course had elements in the syllabi that were designed so I could figure out early on where that group, those individuals, were in their reading skills, their writing skills. Some of them had sensed their calling to ministry through being told they could deliver a good presentation—oral strengths.

Many of them rebelled at my grading system, editing their written assignments, even at the point of noting the presentation was too long when the assignment clearly said how many paragraphs or pages to which they should limit their comments. They rebelled over my asking they do appropriate research and designate that research in ways that someone following them later could pick up the trail they had developed.

Sometimes I was labeled as a reading and writing teacher. My response was that if they couldn't read the thoughts of people who lived and wrote long before they were born, as well as translate those thoughts into matters that could be communicated to people not as educated as they, they had work to do. They were not fulfilling their sense of calling as fully as they should.

Many of the students never considered the reality that writing is one of the first elements of what we can call civilization, which of course means someone must be able to read what is put down whether on wet clay, papyrus, or a screen. Indeed, I was more than implying if they could not write, or read, well they were not quite civilized.

Persuasive –

The earlier chapter on Power may have caused you to make associations with your experiences through the years. No matter the profession—medical, education, law, sales, any number of repair and maintenance vocations—we all have met those who do their jobs, their relationships out of the condign form of power, certainly mixed with compensatory. They are in your face, giving you directions whether those directions are relevant to you or not. They have to be right; they are rarely kind.

I had several teachers along the way who considered themselves as “master” teachers. Their approach was to lecture, leave little to no time for or even offer opportunity for questions for clarification. Their word was law. If given opportunity, and some of them were always on alert, they worked at embarrassing students. I tried that early on but found that to be too tension filled. Also, that when I could have rapport with students, and there my own narratives brought alongside Scripture narratives, gave a little softer tone.

Students came year by year with the males more alpha type in their personalities than not. They were on the prowl to be authoritarian pastors. My advice for them was they thought they were tough, but there is always someone tougher in whatever church they land in. They needed to learn how to mediate, find ways to manage, not resolve because that won't happen, the levels of conflict continually arise. Persuasion, mediation, pointing to and incarnating the fruit of Spirit, thinking and forming around those virtues that Jesus and Paul taught—those are the shaping dynamics for how we incarnate Christian ethics. Their approach of hemming in congregants or anyone else leaving no room for decisions by the individuals flew/flies in the face of the matter of whether faith is a matter of choice or is orchestrated, coerced. The latter traits may get people to profess Christianity, but the profession usually plays out to be relatively shallow, even short lived.

Conclusion: The what, why, and how of Christian ethics—another triad of emphases. The best students and teachers and proclaimers of Christian ethics realize it is not just a discipline, a study course, or only about the latest faddish issue. Rather we are to be about demonstrating the love of God, love of neighbor, based on our appropriate self-love. Such demonstration can take so many forms, may well be the product of improvisation based, however, on our exercised sense of spiritual formation ourselves.

For Further Discussion:

1. If you were asked for a definition, a functional definition, of Christian ethics, what would it be?
2. Where would the elements of what are called spiritual formation interface with Christian ethics?
3. How does the comment to “read and interpret Scripture was to read the Bible as a collection of stories” strike you? What are the stories in the Bible that stand out to you? Why? Do you find values, ways to live life as a God follower, in those stories?
4. What does living life in the here and now, rather than always looking toward then and there mean to you?
5. Does the Triadic Approach convey a simplified way to give further consideration to Christian ethics?