



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## "What Do These Stones Mean?" The Importance of Intentional, Focused Teaching

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### Introduction

1. How could it have happened?
  - a. Israel, a people miraculously rescued from slavery by Yahweh, who promised to provide for them if they would follow him, was facing what amounted to a lawsuit brought against them by Yahweh.
  - b. Israel, whose ancestors responded to the receipt of the Ten Commandments by promising they would hear and do them (Deut 5:27), was charged with consistent failure to do so.
  - c. As the result, Israel faced the prospect of being conquered and destroyed by the Assyrians, a people known for their brutality.
2. That is the situation we find in Hosea 4:1-10.
  - a. The Lord had "a controversy<sup>1</sup> with the inhabitants of the land" (v 1) because the people demonstrated no "faithfulness," "steadfast love," or "knowledge of God in the land."
  - b. Verse 2 shows that faithfulness included ethical concerns; five of the Ten Commandments are named.
  - c. Verses 7-10 show what would happen: A once glorious people—and they probably still thought of themselves that way—would be devastated (vv 7-10).
3. What caused this state of affairs is spelled out in verses 4-6.
  - a. The blame is laid at the feet of the priests and the prophets (vv. 4, 5).
  - b. There was "no knowledge of God in the land" (v. 1) because the leaders had not taught it; the consequences were tragic (v 6).
  - c. This decline did not happen suddenly, or in a vacuum.
    - 1) Three specific causes are given: prosperity, turning to other priorities (idolatry), and priests and prophets who did not do what they were called to do.
    - 2) "The priests are condemned because they have not taught those in their care; they have failed to inculcate knowledge of God's works and his will in his people. They have betrayed the trust Yahweh has placed in them."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Controversy" is the Hebrew רִיב (*rib*), used in antiquity, and the prophets in particular, to refer to a formal complaint lodged by a King [God] via an ambassador who functioned in the role of prosecutor against a subject people.

<sup>2</sup> Michael R. Weed, "Why Johnny Can't Pray," *Christian Studies*, No. 12 (Spring, 1992): 3

## Body

### I. Israel Revisited?

#### A. The danger.

1. It's said that the church is never more than a generation from apostasy. All it takes is for just one generation to fail to diligently fulfill its responsibility to pass on the faith.
2. The decline typically does not happen suddenly, but so gradually it may not be noticed.
3. So, even when we are committed to the Word, we should evaluate whether we have slipped.

#### B. A trend revealed in a survey of our fellowship's history.

1. A typical church Bible class in 1855 was described this way: "'The Superintendent opens the [Sunday] school by reading a [Bible] chapter before the class, and prayer. Then instructions are given from the chapter read in the form of a short lecture. Then recitations and reading, and then rewards dispensed according to merit.' These 48 pupils had collectively memorized 13,319 verses of the New Testament in the previous five months [that's 277.5 verses per student!-DA]. This glimpse of a typical Sunday school illustrates how lecture and Scripture memorization were the most widely used teaching methods throughout the nineteenth century."<sup>3</sup>
2. In the first half of the 20th century, a shift occurred. Graded classes were introduced, more attention was given to education theory, and quarterlies emphasizing Bible stories with questions "designed to impress upon the children's minds the main features of the stories" along with memory verses became the norm in the typical Sunday school class.<sup>4</sup>
3. From the 1960s to the present, a greater shift occurred.
  - a) Education ministers, often better trained in education theory, child development, and family studies than Scripture, became more common.
  - b) "In children's classes, knowledge of the Bible, particularly memory work, has at least been partially replaced by an emphasis on learning concepts (kindness, obedience, etc.) illustrated by biblical and secular stories. In classes for teenagers and adults, Bible study has generally been replaced by a study of 'relevant' topics from a 'biblical perspective.'"
  - c) In current adult curriculum materials, "the driving force behind this shift in curriculum is a quest for relevance. In an attempt to 'meet people where they are,' more emphasis has been placed in our classes on the felt needs of individuals than on hearing the voice of Scripture. 'Thus says the Lord,' has been crowded out by 'What will this do for me?'"<sup>5</sup>

### II. A Question of Balance.

#### A. The shift we have described is not all bad.

1. More emphasis is being given to integrating Bible study with daily concerns.
2. The move from fact-focus to more emphasis on meaning was a necessary correction. "People who had been Christians for over forty years were still 'filling in the blanks.' Our children could recite the books of the Bible, but did not know the love of God."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Gary Holloway, "From Scripture to Sharing: Sunday Schools in Churches of Christ," *Christian Studies* 12 (Spring 1992): 41. The 1855 report is from the *Millennial Harbinger* (1855) 477.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 41-43.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 46.

3. Some method adjustment was needed. "Dry rehearsal of biblical facts is a poor approach to Christian nurture..."<sup>7</sup>

B. But have we shifted too much?

1. Listen to all of Gragg's statement: "Dry rehearsal of biblical facts is a poor approach to Christian nurture, but it represents only a problem of pedagogical deficiency. The solution is more thoughtful and creative teaching. When Scripture is replaced, however, by an alternative subject matter (whether deliberately or unwittingly), the enterprise ceases to be Christian nurture at all, regardless of how 'meaningful' or 'relevant' the curriculum might be."<sup>8</sup>
2. Has too much been surrendered in the interest of methods and relevance?
  - a) "While Sunday schools and Bible classes provide an unending array of discussion groups, sharing sessions, and 'meaningful learning experiences,' biblical illiteracy and ignorance of basic Christian beliefs are reaching epidemic proportion among youth and adults."
  - b) "Johnny can't pray (and knows little Bible and less about the Christian faith) for the same reasons he can't read (and knows little about history and geography). Like the priests and leaders of Hosea's time, many of us entrusted with passing on the faith are betraying that task. Prosperity, careerism, and idolatry apparently played prominent roles in Israel's betrayal; in our time, an additional factor is at work. We are betraying our task for many of the same reasons modern education has betrayed its task, namely, preoccupation with methods and techniques which are firmly rooted in the prevailing myths of the post-Christian age."<sup>9</sup>

### III. Restoring the Biblical Model.

- A. A model to follow: God's plan to stimulate curiosity among the Israelite children as the mechanism for passing on the faith (Joshua 4:1-3, 19-24).<sup>10</sup>
  1. Symbols and rituals were important in the process (vv. 1-3, 19).
  2. The symbol was not an end in itself, but the means for prompting questions about the faith (21, 22).
    - a) It was implied that the older generation would be able to answer.
    - b) It was also implied that the older generation would see that the children were present in the setting where the questions would be asked.
  3. They were to transfer the emphasis from the symbol (stones) to the record of God's actions (23, 24).
  4. The focus was on God and what he had done, not the people's experiences or a message that spoke to them "where they were."
- B. Three priorities should be emphasized.
  1. The priority of content—we should emphasize content over technique.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas L. Gragg, "'What Do These Stones Mean?' Passing on the Faith in Biblical Perspective," *Christian Studies* 12 (Spring 1992): 13.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Both a and b are from Weed, 11.

<sup>10</sup> The following ideas are summarized from Gragg, 15-16.

- a) "If faith in the living God is nurtured not through spiritual introspection but through encounter with the story of God's saving deeds, we must become concerned above all else to recapture the commitment we once had ... to serious Bible study."
- b) "Technique is important only to the extent that it enhances engagement with the content of the biblical story."<sup>11</sup>
2. The priority of meaning—we should stress "spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Col 1:9-10) so that we know the facts, understand the facts, and act on the facts.
  - a) See Joshua 4:24 — "... so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God for ever."
  - b) "The contemporary concern for greater 'relevance' in Christian preaching and teaching is perfectly legitimate.... The answer, however, is not to turn our backs on Bible study or to 'read into' the Bible insights derived from popular psychology or some other fount of cultural wisdom (as if one had to make the Bible relevant). The answer is, rather, to learn better how to discover the inherent relevance of the life-giving message of Scripture and to convey it to others. If we lose contact with the faith-generating story of God's saving deeds, we will have nothing of value to pass on to the next generation."<sup>12</sup>
3. The priority of adult education. Joshua assumed that the older generation knew the story thoroughly. Do we?

### *Conclusion*

1. Let's return to the part of Israel's story revealed in Hosea 4.
  - a. We noted their prosperity, idolatry, and careerism as sources of the problem.
  - b. Surely we understand that these things can tempt us.
2. The question we should ask, therefore, is whether we are really committed to shaping faith in our children. It will not happen by accident, but only as we determine to do it and only as we understand that it involves a commitment to make sure we have something to pass on.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.