

Response to Herbert Hoefers *Proclaiming a "Theologyless" Christ* by Charles H. Kraft

I applaud Dr. Hoefers for this brief attempt to alert us to the fact that if we truly believe in contextualization, we need to get beyond our preoccupation with theology. I have long been dissatisfied with the focus on "Contextualization of Theology," as if theological formulations are a primary concern of God. As Hoefers points out, the Biblical authors seemed to be little concerned with theological statements or abstractions, though some occur.

Theologizing is done in generalizations. And there are quite a few generalizations in the Scriptures: "all have sinned," "God so loved the world," "come to me all you who are carrying heavy burdens," and many more such statements are generalizations that could be called "theological." But, as I pointed out in *Christianity in Culture* (rev. ed. 2005), the Bible is mainly a casebook rather than a textbook or theological treatise. Its messages are, therefore, mostly contained in specific, life-related interactions between God and humans rather than in theological generalizations that, though true, have less impact than more specific messages.

Communication theory points out that specific messages have greater impact than generalized messages that may say the same thing but are not directed to any one specific person or group. People can better apply specific than general messages even

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if such messages are directed to other people at other times and with other worldviews. "You must be born again," for example, has greater impact today, as it did originally, when spoken specifically to one person and the emphasis put on the first word. Jesus said to Nicodemus, never as far as we know to anyone else, "You must be born again." But it loses its impact when made a theological generalization as in "People must be born again if they are to spend eternity with God." Everything in the Bible is addressed to someone, never spoken out "into thin air" as is theology. And specific people need to hear the Biblical messages as specific rather than in theological propositions.

In our day, certain theologians are discovering that storytelling has greater impact than the kind of theologizing we have known for generations. They call their approach "Narrative theology" but usually fail to give Jesus credit for inventing it. And memory specialists have discovered that messages that are picture-based are remembered longer and better than messages that are word-based (Schacter 1996). Jesus knew this.

One more support for what Hoefers is saying: I have discussed and illustrated in a new textbook on contextualization of Christianity called *Appropriate Christianity* (2005) what I call "The Three Crucial Dimensions" of Christianity. They are Allegiance leading to Relationship, Truth/Knowledge leading to Understanding and Spiritual Power leading to Freedom. The most important of these is Allegiance-Relationship. All of the cardinal doctrines of our faith are relational. It is the relationship with God that Scripture teaches and illustrates most strongly. Truth and Spiritual Power are intended to support this Relationship.

However, our western worldview elevates knowledge (truth) to such prominence that we specialize in knowing about Christian teachings and naively regard the doing of these teachings as a by-product. Thus, theologiz-

ing (knowledge about) becomes our primary focus rather than the living of the relationship between us and God that is central to Scripture. But, as Hoefers says,

Faith arises in the heart by the power of the Holy Spirit, not in the mind by the power of a theological construct.

Then, as evangelicals we tend to ignore the power dimension completely. Yet it is the experiencing of Jesus' power that enables us to shed our heavy emotional and spiritual burdens and to relate to God as we are intended to. Thus, spiritual power is also intended to serve Christian relationship. And most of the world is looking for a Christianity with power to enable them to cope with life.

All of this to amplify, if possible, the important message that Hoefers is trying to get across. His points and illustrations of how people of various worldviews might handle a "theologyless" Gospel are suggestive. In a few pages, he has provocatively opened up for those of us committed to the contextualization of Christianity (not just theology) the implications of what we have been aiming at. His article deserves wide distribution. I wish it had come out in time to be included in *Appropriate Christianity*. **IJFM**

References Cited

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