

The Ways of Obedience: Scripture and the Global South¹

Michael Nai-Chiu Poon

“Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts: . . .” (*Venite*)

It was not a time for elation for Global South Primates when they received the Communion Sub-group Report at Dar es Salaam in February 2007. The remarkable turn of events in that mid-February weekend did not change that. All the more the present is not a time for celebration, but for self-examination and more costly discipleship, for the sake of the common good of the Communion.

The present does not merely call for a refreshed study of the methods of interpreting scripture (cf. *Tanzania Communiqué*, 8 on “The Hermeneutical Project”). Such can become a self-absorbing exercise that reflects “internal division” rather than having anything to do with the transforming good news for a world inflicted with human grief, borrowing Canterbury’s words.² More pointedly, such exercise is safe. It is difficult for the Communion to come to a common mind on methodology anyway. All can continue their own familiar and separate ways.

To obey Christ today, Global South churches need to submit themselves to the Scripture in a more radical manner. It takes more than merely having orthodox upbringing and evangelical friends for a person to be an orthodox today. The crisis is not out there in the West, but at the home front. The challenge before the churches is in translating their formal confession of Scriptural authority into practice: what does it mean in concrete terms for Christian communities to live under the authority of God’s Word?

There is of course a easier approach to this. Philip Jenkins’ analysis shows such way in his book *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: OUP, 2006). In the opening Chapter “Shall the Fundamentalist Win?”, he tried to explain why the Global South adopts a literal interpretation of scripture:³

For the growing churches of the global South, the Bible speaks to everyday, real-world issues of poverty and debt, famine and urban crisis, racial and gender oppression, state brutality and persecution. The omnipresence of poverty promotes awareness of the transience of life, the dependence of individuals and nations on God, and the distrust of the secular order.

To Jenkins, the Bible speaks directly to Christians in the Global South because they are more able to connect their impressions and sensations with those in the Biblical world. Jenkins’ depiction of the Global South is problematic. After all, some of the most sophisticated world-class cities are in the Global South; Christians there also adhere to “literal interpretation” of the Bible. I have suggested elsewhere nation building projects in the past sixty years led to a heightened institutional and homogeneous understanding of religions. This may offer a better explanation for the Global South Christianities we now witness.⁴

More relevant for our present discussion, Jenkins suggests that those who live in the crisis-ridden Global South are more able to understand the Bible and to submit to its authority. Their tragic life contexts provide the direct interpretative lens for understanding the Bible. Following this logic, there would then an unbridgeable divide between those in the “advanced and stable” societies in the Northern Hemisphere and those in “underdeveloped” regions in the Global South. Whilst those in the richer countries would need to emphasize their distance from the Biblical world; those in the Global South simply can embrace the Bible without any difficulty. If the Communion adopted such line of reasoning, the Hermeneutics Project would break down with incommensurable cultural and social contexts – “the Bible speaks (or does not speak) to my life situation. That’s all there is to it!”⁵

But this would not do. Submitting to God’s Word is never merely a social phenomenon. It is a faith-decision: to obey and follow Christ in the present time. There exists, as Oliver O’Donovan puts it, a “hermeneutical distance” between us and the Biblical text”. The Word has its own objective standing. “The distance between the text and ourselves can never be, and should never be supposed to be, swallowed up by our understanding.” It demands “fresh scrutiny in fresh reading”.⁶ O’Donovan further notes in his Fourth Sermon on the Subjects of the Day: “Scripture and Obedience”:⁷

The authority of Scripture is proved, then, precisely as it does, in fact, shed light on the decisions we are faced with, forcing us to re-evaluate our situation and correct our assumptions about what we are going to do.”

. . . The most mysterious [and the more highly dangerous] question anyone has to face is not, *what does Scripture mean?*, but, *what does the situation I am facing mean?* If we have even begun to appreciate the nature of this question, and how a false judgment of ourselves can lead us to destruction, we shall be on our guard against any hermeneutic proposal to *reverse* the sequence of discernments, starting with our own situation and turning back to Scripture to look for something there to fit it.

What does it mean for churches in the Global South to move beyond asking “what does Scripture mean” to under the light of God’s Word “what does the situation I am facing mean”?

(1) *Global South churches need to widen their horizons for God’s Word.* The Word indeed is for the People of God, because it is meant *primarily* to be the life-giving Word for our societies and nations. Remove the socio-political contexts, the prophets’ ministries in the Old Testament would become unintelligible. The Scripture does not merely offer Christians an inner motivation in carrying out humanitarian tasks in this tragic world. God’s Word is the life-principle for the world (Psalm 95-100); all the more we should attend to it in this age when human errors carry irreversible outcome for the future of the world.

Put in another way, the Scripture is not merely a manual for Christians alone. It presents to the whole creation the vision and glory of life before God. Irenaeus noted: “The glory of God is a living man; and the life of man is the vision of God. For if the manifestation of God in creation gives life to all who live on earth, much more does the revelation of the Father through the Word bestow life on those who see God (*adv. haer*, 4.20.6).” Christian communities today must therefore devote themselves to understand how the life-giving Word is connected to human life in all its profundity.

(2) *To speak God’s Word to our nations effectively, Global South churches need to pick up the Scriptural concepts for such tasks.* This is why the question “what does the situation I am facing mean” is “more highly dangerous”. Earthly authorities often demand absolute loyalty; thus confessing Christ alone is Lord can carry dire political consequences. Martyrdom indeed is a reality for Christians around the world.⁸ At the same time, martyrdom by blood may not be the only way for confessing Christ. To allow God’s Word to become life for our nations, merely to responding to the immediate issues and crises is not enough. We need to learn how to interpret aright – to see life as an ordered whole. To do this, we need to come to study the Scripture in a deeper way: to understand the theological concepts behind the many statutes and commandments. (Romans 12:2).⁹ We can do this well only if we let the Scripture speak to our mind and through the communion of saints. This is why we always attach importance to “reason” and “tradition”. These are not faculties that are independent of the Scripture. Rather, until the Word grips the imagination and intellect, life is not truly transformed. And unless the present-day Christian communities are able to inherit the theological questions and histories of Biblical interpretation of their forebears and those around the world, they abstract themselves from the God’s purposes for the Communion of Saints.

(3) *The ministry of God’s Word must again become the focal point in public worship.* We cannot take this for granted. Busy pastors often delegate their teaching responsibilities to parish assistants, who in their turn may pass this task to young people. They again would perhaps substitute the ministry of the Word with Praise and Worship sessions. Though the Book of Common Prayer still occupies a nominal position in many churches; in practice “contemporary and free style worship” becomes the staple diet for many congregations. Thus, present-day Christians (Anglicans in particular) are in danger of not able to know hymns, prayers, and even the Scripture by heart. Issues and sensations drive our religious activities. I believe this weakness lies behind Jenkins’ observation that churches that was once orthodox can easily become otherwise in the next generation.¹⁰

Since the 1970s, the Anglican Communion has devoted considerable energy into structural issues. We moved confidently in creating new instruments and superstructures along the way. Indeed, given enough financial power, we can engineer churches and dioceses to conform to ACC guidelines. The present Anglican crisis recalls the Communion to re-examine the foundations of its communal life. Often we forget the Anglican Communion came about in haphazard ways: mainly through mission initiatives from those at the ground-levels. Along the way, those from other traditions – whether evangelical or catholic – were enlisted to “Anglican” enterprises to bring God’s Word to the mission fields. The missionaries in the first half of the nineteenth century – I refer in

particular to those who worked in China – were confident the converts could organize their own churches under God’s Word alone. The sacrificial translation of the Bible into vernacular would make no sense if this was not so. These forebears played an important role in shaping the Global South understanding of the Scripture and ethos.

What do Global South churches understand by “Scriptural authority”? Perhaps a better way to ask is: What has the profession “We believe the Holy Scriptures as containing all things necessary for salvation and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith” produced in our ecclesial and national life? We can do well by asking the Provinces: How has the Word shaped your churches and your nations? Our submission to God’s Word is proved by the fruit: that the Word so shape our communal life that it becomes a new vision of social life for the present world.

Let Jesus Christ become the centre of our public life. There, the King gathers his own around him. He shall authenticate his own authority over the churches and all nations.

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¹ I am grateful to Dr Ian Welch, my historian colleague in Canberra, for encouraging me, soon after the Primates’ Meeting in Tanzania, to write something on how the Global South understands by Biblical authority. I take his invitation as a gentle reminder that Global South churches need to submit to God’s Holy Word as well.

² “Archbishop’s comments at the final press conference in Tanzania, 20th February 2007”, *Archbishop of Canterbury Press Release*, <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/releases/070220.htm>.

³ Philip Jenkins, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?”, *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/decemberweb-only/149-22.0.html>.

⁴ “Theological Education and Nation Building”, *Trinity Theological Journal* 14 (2006): 124-139. See also Adrian Hastings’ analysis of the importance of text in nation building. “The nation and nationalism” in *The Construction of Nationhood, Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1997): 1-34.

⁵ Note ECUSA Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori’s revealing perception of the Anglican Communion: “A number of the primates represent provinces, especially in *westernized or developed nations*, where homosexuality is recognized and discussed. . . . There is a final group of primates who are exceedingly exercised about our church’s actions, and see them as anti-scriptural and incredibly difficult for them as they attempt to evangelize *in their own contexts* [italics added]”. See “A conversation with Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori”, *Episcopal News Service*, February 28, 2007, http://www.episcopalchurch.org/3577_82917_ENG_HTM.htm.

⁶ Oliver O’Donovan, “Hermeneutical Distance”, *Fulcrum*, <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/news/2006/20061109odonovan5.cfm?doc=151>.

⁷ Oliver O’Donovan, “Scripture and Obedience”, *Fulcrum*, <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=145>.

⁸ Here I recall my earlier conversations with my friend Ephraim Radner. See his eloquent essay “Communion’s Martyred Depth”, *Global South Anglican*,

http://www.globalsouthanglican.org/index.php/comments/communions_martyred_depth_dr_ephr_aim_radner/.

⁹ I am ever indebted to Professor Oliver O'Donovan for his contribution to hermeneutics. See in this connection, "Israel and the reading of the Scripture" in *The Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge: University Press, 1996), 21-29; "The Authority of Christ" in *Resurrection and the Moral Order* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986): 140-162; and "The Scriptures" in *On The Thirty-Nine Articles* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1986): 49-64.

¹⁰ "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?"