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BIBLICAL ILLITERACY

A recent Barna Research Group survey showed some disturbing trends. Some of these are not surprising to some in the churches of Christ. Some are surprising on the very face of them (such as the finding that a majority of people know Easter as a religious holiday but only a small number associate it with the resurrection). Some results are positive, while some should wake up the church.

The congregations that call themselves the Church of Christ have been traditionally known as “book, chapter, and verse” oriented. To the older generations it is not surprising that biblical literacy is declining across the board. Some might even say that this has been happening for centuries. The growing numbers of people who do not believe that immersion is essential to salvation is pointed to as evidence of the length of time this has been a trend. One can listen to most radio or television preachers and never once hear a direct quote of scripture, or a reference to where even an allusion can be found. Some preachers have gone through seminaries in which doctrine was taught, but the Bible never opened. To a group known once as “people of the Book,” this is nothing new. The problem, identified by experience and observation, is that even in the groups known as Bible oriented and biblically conservative, the younger generations are not following in their parents’ and grandparents’ footsteps.

I know adults who have long been associated with congregations of the churches of Christ who have moved toward the idea that one can be saved and then be baptized (immersed). Salvation at the point of baptism has been the one hard-line doctrine of these congregations, yet they are teaching so many other things that they have forgotten to teach, from the scriptures, why they believe the way they do. And if the adults are losing that faith, what are the children being taught? A whole generation of people who have believed that the Dispensational Premillennialist view ignores every rule of interpretation of scriptures has failed to teach their children that the Bible does not teach of a coming thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. It is not just the Christian world as a whole that are becoming biblically illiterate, it is also the children of people who have prided themselves on their biblical literacy.

Perhaps as a result of this lack of reading and understanding the Bible, people are less inclined to tell others about their faith. Among the younger generations,

practical concerns of life (education, career, friendships, and travel) come before family and faith. Further, because of a lack of understanding why we believe what we believe, people are less likely to draw the line at certain core beliefs. It is more important to fit in with the world’s view than to stand on God’s side. As a result, many people are not seeing that Christianity has any value. If people fail to take a stand, and if they don’t have the scriptural grounding to base snap decisions on core values, others don’t see Christ as an option in their lives. If Jesus is only one teacher among many moralists there is no reason to accept him as superior, or, more importantly, as savior.

On the positive side, people are more likely to engage in social issues. Helping the poor, homeless, or disenfranchised is important. The emphasis on these things needs to be encouraged. Barna notes, however, that the challenge will be to sustain this tendency. If it is based solely on a sense of justice or rightness it will be short-lived. Unless we tie the good works to the God of all good, this will go the way of the “social gospel” of the 1960’s. Personal concerns will take precedence, and social concerns will die out. “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35) That is good, and important. But unless tied to “we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them,” (Eph 2:10) they become optional.

We need to be teaching the word of God. We need to be teaching why the word of God is important. And we need to be teaching that social activism is good not because it is good but because God requires it. Until then, we can expect to lose the next generation to a watered down version of faith, to be brought out when all else fails.

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WWJD/WDJS/WDJD

WWJD. You can see it on web sites, bumper stickers, even billboards. Some craft stores even sell jewelry kits with beads specifically chosen to create WWJD bracelets and other jewelry. If you are one of the few people who have not previously been exposed to this acronym, it stands for “What Would Jesus Do?” It is intended to remind people to think before they act. Are your actions something that the Messiah would have done? In an unfamiliar or questionable situation, take Jesus as your standard of action. Setting aside the question of whether the acronym is so ubiquitous as to become almost invisible, there are other issues about whether this is even the right question to ask.

A similar question, popular in some circles, might be WDJS. “What Did Jesus Say?” The followers of this mantra might say that if we don’t have it recorded that Jesus addressed an issue, then what other people said bears no weight. The words of Jesus become the ultimate authority, and the rest of the Bible is essentially meaningless. Why study the Old Testament? It does not contain anything that Jesus said. If it is not found in the gospels (or possibly the book of Acts) it bears no authority. Particularly, this would be the theme of the anti-Pauline faction. An example would be that although Paul spoke against homosexual acts, Jesus said nothing about them; therefore, the performance of homosexual acts is not specifically condemned. If Jesus never called himself

How much of what Jesus said and did is based purely on his relationship with the Law of Moses?

the Son of God—he did one time (Jn 9:35-37)—then he must have been a regular man who became the Messiah when he was executed on the stake. The WDJS idea is that which was behind the old “red letter” Bibles that you hardly ever see today. For the same reasons that WWJD might not be the right question, this idea has its faults.

The Jewish Question

The first reason that either of these questions might be inappropriate or incomplete has to do with the situation into which Jesus was born. Jesus was Jewish. He lived and died under the Law of Moses. Paul told the Galatians that it had to be so, in order for him to be able to

save the Jewish people. “But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.” (Gal 4:4-5). For the majority of Christians today, who are not Jewish, this poses a problem. The non-Jewish believers in the Messiah are not bound by the requirements of the Law of Moses.

Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day. (Acts 15:19-21).

So, how much of what Jesus said and did is based purely on his relationship with the Law of Moses? Jesus kept the Ten Commandments strictly. He kept kosher. He observed the sabbath. Jesus kept Passover. These were all commanded specifically to the Jewish people. Non-Jews were never required to keep the dietary laws. Non-Jews are unable to properly keep sabbath. Non-Jews are specifically forbidden to keep certain aspects of Passover. So do we who are not Jewish ask WWJD, and violate the law in trying to keep it? Jesus did not tell the robber on the cross to be immersed (baptized) for forgiveness of sins (although the man had probably been immersed many times), although that was the rite of purification under the Law. Does that mean that Peter and Paul are wrong in teaching that immersion is essential for forgiveness of sins? The robber lived and died a Jew. Can what Jesus told him be held to be binding on non-Jews after the resurrection? On the other hand, since what Jesus taught about marriage after a divorce was in the context of the Law of Moses, can a person ignore that teaching because he or she is not Jewish? There are those who teach this. If we base our actions strictly on WWJD or WDJS, then we must all become Jewish, and Acts 15 and the book of Galatians should be cut out of our Bibles.

Making Assumptions

A second problem comes when we make assumptions that Jesus might not have done something because we think he wouldn’t. If cigarettes had been around when Jesus lived, would he have smoked? Probably not. But we cannot know that for sure. To say that smoking is absolutely a sin and not something Jesus would have done is to reason from facts not in evidence.

There are so many things that might be expedient (or not) that Jesus never addressed. WWJD is an incomplete doctrine. It is valid, as far as it goes, but it doesn't cover every situation. A bumper sticker says, "How would Jesus drive?" We know he would have kept the speed limit (because that is the law), and probably would have been a courteous driver. Because driving presents a number of choices that Jesus never faced, there are certain aspects of the question that cannot be directly answered.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with making assumptions. We do it all the time. We cannot function without making certain assumptions. This is true in all aspects of life. This is especially true in religion, because we live by faith. Faith is a reasonable assumption. Some things we cannot know with absolute certainty. Some things we must extrapolate from existing knowledge. Jesus commanded his followers to go into all the world and teach (Mk 16:15). Because this is a generic command we must make assumptions that it is acceptable to travel by a variety of means. Because he did not specify ship, camel, or foot, we assume that we can travel by plane or automobile as well as by those methods. Because no law can cover every situation, we must make some reasoned assumptions.

By its own nature, WWJD asks us to make assumptions. By asking what would another do, we assume that we have the mind of that person. While Paul urges the Philippians, and us, to have the mind of Christ (Php 2), we cannot always know exactly what Jesus would do. Further, it might be that Jesus would have exercised miraculous powers that we do not have, in certain circumstances.

Those who are of the WDJS philosophy must also face assumptions. The biggest one is that everything that Jesus said is recorded in scripture. Barring that, they must assume that everything that Jesus said that might bear on any circumstance of our life is recorded. That not everything of importance is recorded in the gospels is obvious. Paul quoted Jesus as saying, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35) This cannot be found in the gospels. Are we expected to believe that this is the only quotation from Jesus that is not in the gospels that applies to everyone? Or can we reasonably expect that in three or four years of preaching, Jesus might have said many more things that are not recorded. John states that many other signs and actions Jesus did that he did not record. Might that not also be said about things Jesus said?

WDJD

Ultimately, however, the question is not WWJD or WDJS; it is WDJD. What DID Jesus do? What he said is important, but not always definitive. What he might do in a situation might help someone avoid sin. Basically,

though, what Jesus would do or did say is of secondary importance. That might shock some people, but it is true. What Jesus said bears weight, but it is essentially meaningless without what he did. What he might do may be helpful, but is unimportant compared to what he did do.

Jesus was an important teacher and philosopher. He was God. The things he said were the words of God. Yet without what he did, the words he spoke bear little real weight. Without his ultimate deed, he is simply another teacher and philosopher. Many in the world have this view of him. It is a principal difference between Christianity and Islam. Islam teaches that Jesus was one of a long line of prophets of God, and not more than a prophet.

Jesus was a miracle worker. He showed compassion to the poor and wounded. He did many things, some of which are beyond our ability. Nevertheless, even

Basing decisions on what Jesus said assumes that everything he said on every possible topic is recorded in scripture.

he turned away the people who only care for what he would do. "Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled." (Jn 6:26) It was not enough to Jesus for people to ask what he would do. Nothing that he would do or say has any meaning without his ultimate act.

Jesus died, was buried, and rose again. Paul says this, along with the post-resurrection appearances, is the gospel. This is the good news. Jesus died that forgiveness of sins might be available to all. Jesus presented himself as the sacrifice for sin; as the only effective, one-and-done sacrifice for all the sins of mankind for all time.

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you." (Jn 14:13-14)

But now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation. (Heb 9:26-28)

That is the ultimate answer to WWJD. That is the important answer to WDJD.

NEW YEARS REVOLUTIONS

Every new year people resolve to make changes for the coming year. Sometimes they even follow through on that resolve. Many times, however, older habits get in the way. I started going to a gym in October three years ago. Since that time, every first week in January I notice an increase in attendance. Every third week in January I notice that attendance is back down to the previous levels. Resolutions don't last long. Instead of looking at resolutions, maybe we should be planning revolutions. We need to change "I will" to "I am;" replace plans for what we will do with changes in who we are.

Often people resolve to stop committing particular sins. The problem is that specific sins are not the problem; sin is the problem. Even the prayers of many Christians indicate a lack of revolution. "We are sinners, God. Forgive us." What is needed is a revolution in outlook. Instead of "I am a sinner," we need to say "I am saved." Paul speaks in detail about this revolution in Romans 6. He calls it a new life.

Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. (Rom 6:3-6)

A sinner is one who walks in sin. He is not one who simply commits sin, but one who continues in it. Our

new years revolution should be that we walk in the light (1 Jn 1:7), in a new life as a forgiven person.

There may not be a person in the world who says, "I pray enough. I don't need to pray more." A common new years resolution is "I will pray more." It is an honorable resolution. The problem is that it addresses an action, not a person. Replace I will pray with I am a child of God. Most people communicate with parents. If separated by distance it may not be by Facebook and e-mail. The parent-child connection may be among the strongest, and is accompanied by communication. One might resolve to call a friend more often, and fail to do so; yet one continues to speak with a parent. When we revolutionize our connection with God we will not have to resolve to pray more often. It becomes part of our nature.

The same thing applies to our attendance at assemblies of the church. "I will go to church more often" emphasizes the action, not the motivation. "Going to church" is an admirable goal. Perhaps a revolution in phrasing, though, would make it a more permanent part of life. Going to church is similar to going to work or school. It is an obligation to be met with more or (often) less enthusiasm. Instead of resolving to go to church, think of it as visiting the saints. Even the most antisocial of us look forward to seeing people we like. Revolutionizing the church from a building to a body of friends makes it much easier to want to be present when others are present.

Revolutions often involve a change in government. So must it be with our new years revolutions. When we resolve that "I will" we are governing ourselves. With the new years revolution, God replaces me as the government. That makes other changes so much easier.

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