THIRD INTERNATIONAL TRAINING CONSULTATION - "Hermeneutics for the heart…and mind"
2.2 Training for depth: Encouraging Biblical understanding and critical thinking
Presentation 1 - Training Hermeneutical Leaders in the 21st century – David Smith

Introduction

God is calling leaders today much like the call that went out in Ezekiel's time. Ezekiel 22:30, "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land…." In the past God was looking for people to stand in the gap between himself and the land. God today is looking for such people, people who can stand between God and the world. God seeks leaders who can bridge between the Word of God and the world, for God. He seeks people who understanding well both the Word of God and the context of the world around, and can lead God's people well with integrity of heart.

Within the church worldwide there are many approaches to connecting the Word of God with the context in the world. Leaders in our local churches will be employing one or a combination of these such approaches either knowingly or blindly. Let's consider the four most common approaches.

Broad Hermeneutical Approaches:

1. **Blueprint:** The blueprint approach to church leadership occurs where biblical and theological ideas or ideals are stamped onto the context. This is where theological theory determines our practice. (I use the word theory to represent our interpretation and understanding of the Bible on any given topic.) In other words we develop a body of truth that we apply through similar practices into many contexts. We have one set of answers that we view as above culture and are dispensed into any context without much reference to changes within the context. These leaders studied a theology only degree. "This is the RIGHT way!" is the leader's mantra.
2. **Traditional:** The traditional approach of church leadership occurs where the practices of the past are continually passed on. This is where our past practices and their underlying theology determines our present and future practices and our thinking. These practices have been biblically supported within the tradition, but there is no willingness or ability by these leaders to undertake a theological or contextual review of the practices of the church. Therefore that which is - remains as is. Not having a deep theological understanding of what lies behind the essence and expression of the church the leaders often become defensive, having only one answer to any question posed by the changing context – "We have always done it this way!" Here the practices and theology of today continue to be the practice and theology of tomorrow. These leaders often do not study widely. "This is the ONLY way!" is the leader's mantra.
3. **Pragmatic:** The pragmatic approach of church leadership occurs where the changing context and the presenting needs of the people are allowed to determine the expression and thus the underlying theology of the church. This is where the changing practices of the church determine the theology espoused. Such churches are not deeply theological and therefore adopt a, whatever works and is successful, approach to ministry. These leaders may have some ministry training but without much biblical or theological depth. "This is the BEST way!" is the leader's mantra.
4. **Dynamic Prophetic:** We live in a world of changing contexts and increased complexity. Leaders who realise this and yet seek to also be faithful to Scripture seek a dynamic conversational approach – where the Bible, theology and church practices are in a continual

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conversation with the context. Here theology and practice exist in a dynamic bridging conversation. Leaders here see themselves as practical theologians within a context that promotes the need for such a continual dynamic reflection on Scripture, theology and context which leads to a prophetic response. Leaders of this type require deep biblical, theological, and contextualised ministry training. "How do we reflect (be) and serve (do) God faithfully in this context?" is the leader's defining question. Notice here we tend to lead with questions rather than answers. It is a conversation.

We now turn to have a closer look at what it means for pastors and leaders to bridge the gap between the Word of God and the world through such a dynamic conversational approach.

Dynamic Prophetic Approach

1. **Understand the Church:** We must understand the ideal for the church or the situation in three dimensions. I will focus here on the dimensions in the context of the church:
   a. Essence Dimension: This is our understanding of what constitutes the essential nature of the church. The traditional creedal attributes (one, holy, catholic, apostolic) (see Moltmann 1985, Van Engen 1991, Pickard 2012), the Reformational (one, holy, confessing, community), the Trinitarian (People of God, Body of Christ, Temple of the Spirit) (see Erickson 1998, Grenz 2000, Haight 2008), and the relational approaches (with God, with Christians, with the world) (see Grudem 1994, Clowney 1995, Geisler 2005, Nel 2009, Moynagh 2012) dominate in this area. The essence is what the church is called to be in the world. It is the indicative of the church – the church as the reflection, image, presence and sign of God in the world.
   b. Expression Dimension: This dimension includes broad expression categories that the church undertakes in order to realise its essence, pursue its purpose, and move the faith community toward its eschatological goal. This is what the church is called to do in the world. It is the imperative of the church – the church as the action and presence of God in and for the world by the Spirit.
   c. Goal Dimension: This is the eschatological call and destiny of the church. This is what the church has been created to be in Christ. This is what we are called to realise in the church now by the Spirit. And this is what the church will be fully at the coming of Christ. We will spend more time in my workshop unpacking these three dimensions of the church.

2. **Understand the World:** Similarly we must understand the reality of the world or situations within the world in three dimensions:
   a. Essential Worldview: How do the people in your cultural context view the world? A worldview comprises the dominant culturally accepted values of any context. A dominant value of the western worldview is individualism.
   b. Contextual Expressions: How do the people in your context express their underlying cultural and contextual values? In the West "Meet my needs!", "I have my rights!", "Look after number one!" are common life expressions of this worldview.
   c. Goals: This is the intended outcome of pursuing the worldview value through its various cultural and contextual expressions. The goal of individualism, expressed

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through actions design to meet the individual's needs and rights, is self-fulfilment and self-advancement.

3. **Discern the Gap:** Here we employ four different hermeneutical reflections in order to discern the gap between the church and the world/situation.

    a. **Personal Hermeneutics:** Here we ask the question "Do I understand myself well?" This reflection is focussed on ourselves. We need to be aware that we ourselves are interpreters wearing our own cultural, contextual, and worldview glasses. We need to be careful that we are not operating out of presuppositions, whether biblical, theological or situational that are not aligned with Scripture. We need to be aware of these presuppositions and any bias tendencies we may have when pursuing our situational, biblical and theological hermeneutics.

    b. **Situational Hermeneutics:** Here we ask the question "Do I understand the situation well?" We need to be firstly curious, not presumptuous. Through situational hermeneutics we seek to carefully describe and understand the culture, context and details of the story that surround the event, issue, or biblical text.

    c. **Biblical Hermeneutics:** Here we ask the question "Do I understand Scripture well?" Here we engage with the text of Scripture in a faithful way considering aspects such as authorial intent, contextual elements, within a canonical framework.

    d. **Theological Hermeneutics:** Here we ask the question "Do I understand Theology well?" Here we engage with the broad themes of Scripture in a faithful way considering the church, the world, and our place, within the grand drama of God – that is to create of a covenant people for himself. Biblical hermeneutics helps us to understand each piece of a large jigsaw puzzle. Theology helps us to put the pieces together so we can clearly see the big picture. From my experience our movement tends to see the pieces or collections of pieces, but not have a clear overall picture from God's perspective and therefore not understand well where each piece fits within the big picture.

    e. **The Gap and the Goal:** Having undertaken this hermeneutical work the gap between the Word of God and the world can be discerned. The gap can be defined using the three dimensions of essence, expression and goal. Having done all the work that has gone before we then ask "What is our Goal?" What is our goal response that bridges the gap between the Word of God and the world? The Word of God is the world of God. His desire is for us, the church and the world to be aligned to his will in essence, expression and in our eschatological orientation toward all that is complete in him. Movement in this direction is our goal.

    f. **Theological Education:** Our training courses should be designed around these four areas in an integrated fashion – Personal Formation, Biblical Understanding, Theological Understanding, and Ministry Formation. Ministry formation includes situational and gap discernment, leadership and ministry skills, and bridge building.

4. **Being the Bridge:** How do we move people, the church, the world, toward alignment with the essence, expression and the goal given by God for his people? Let's look here at 5 components that as leaders we will need to be aware of:

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a. This is relational: We stand with the people seeking to understand their story, their context and their picture of God.

b. This is prophetic: We boldly, yet contextually, lovingly communicate God's perspective in word, action and through our presence. This communication should include the indicative and the imperative as a call from God that awaits a free response. We often leave out the indicative, the why, in the rush to impress the indicative on others. How many sermons include the need to not commit adultery or to not be immoral compared to those which include a careful presentation of why these commands exist? Does our call for an imperative response come from a greater understanding of: the trinitarian nature of God, the covenantal love of God, our being created in God's image, the holiness of God, his relational reconciling work in Christ, and his eschatological goal.

c. This is incarnational: In the midst of the mess of life we faithfully, lovingly and incarnationally walk with the person pointing them toward God, through the Word, through life, and through loving community.

d. This is communal: We exist as a community. And John 13:34-35 clearly expresses the fact that our communal love is missional; people will see God and know his love through us. We are to take our God shaped community into the world. Often our responses are more individualistic, what I should do, rather than communal, what should we do together.

e. This is visionary: We must see ministry from God's perspective. We do not define people by who they are now. While we understand the fallen nature and the brokenness of the "now", we nevertheless must also see clearly that which is "not yet", that which God desires for us all. We must see what can and should be, and one day will be, with God's eyes.

5. **The Continuing Dynamic Process:** Culture changes. Contexts change. Worldviews and values change. And our understanding of Scripture constantly needs sharpening. Because of these and other factors the gaps between the Word of God, the church and the world are in constant movement. Therefore as leaders we must be in constant dynamic hermeneutical action, considering ourselves, the situation, the Bible and theology. We are to be in constant dynamic conversation with God and with the world, building bridges to cross the gaps, aligning the church according to his will and reconciling the world to God.

The Question the Question Model – Questions before Answers

a. What is your presenting question?
b. Why do you ask the question? Situational Hermeneutics
c. What are your presuppositions? Personal Hermeneutics
d. What is your real question?
e. How does the Bible and Theology deal with the real question? Biblical and Theological Hermeneutics
f. How does this affect your presuppositions? New Personal Understanding
g. How would you now ask your question?

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     h. How would you answer the new question? New Situation Understanding

     i. How does this affect your world, worldview and your action? Response Action

Question the Text Model – Questions to bring Answers

     a. What is the presenting issue?

     b. Why does the text raise this issue? Situational Hermeneutics

     c. What are your presuppositions regarding this issue? Personal Hermeneutics

     d. How does the Bible and Theology address the issue? Biblical and Theological Hermeneutics

     e. How does this affect your presuppositions? New Personal Understanding

     f. What is the intended goal in relation to this issue?

     g. How would you address the issue in your context? New Situation Understanding

     h. How does this affect your world, worldview and your action? Response Action

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