

Minimizing the Bible?

by John Piper

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Seeker-Driven Pastors and Radical Contextualization in Missions

I have been pondering a possible relationship between the minimizing of the Bible in so-called seeker-driven churches and in some of the radical forms of contextualization that have emerged in missions. Perhaps there isn't any connection. But I wonder. The common denominator that I am pondering is the loss of confidence that declaring what the Bible says in the power of the Holy Spirit can create and sustain the church of Christ.

This morning I just read John 2:11, "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and *manifested his glory*. And his disciples *believed* in him." I bowed and prayed, "O Lord, this is how faith happens. People are given eyes to see your glory in your person and in your deeds. Please don't let me turn away from the ministry that puts all the emphasis on the 'gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God'" (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Then I was reminded of another text in John which connected the revelation of Christ's glory to the written word of God. John 20:30-31, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." The signs that reveal the

faith-awakening glory of Christ are not mainly new signs being done today, but the signs that are written in the gospels. These are written "so that you may believe." He "manifested his *glory*. And his disciples *believed* in him." That is the way faith comes. Jesus said that when the Holy Spirit comes "He will glorify me!" (John 16:14). Therefore we declare the fullness of the glorious Person and Work of Christ in history. That is how the church is created and sustained.

It seems to me that a growing number of pastors and missionaries have lost confidence in this truth. They have concluded that the gap between the glory of Christ and the felt needs of their neighbors, or between the glory of Christ and the religion of the nationals, is simply too great for the fullness of God's word to overcome. The upshot seems to be the minimization of the Word of God in its robust and glorious fullness.

This is on my front burner just now because in recent weeks I have received a steady stream of testimonies from aching saints who say in so many words, "Our pastor doesn't proclaim to us what the Bible says and means. The messages are not revelations of the glory of Christ. They are advice-talks with a religious twist." And then I have been reading about certain kinds of gospel contextualization in missions that seem to minimize the fullness of the biblical revelation which converts should share with others. So I have

been pondering whether there are connections.

I have no desire to naively equate the cultural conglomerate of Western Christianity with the true, spiritual body of Christ. I can appreciate avoiding the word “Christian” in a missions context where it signifies: degenerate, materialistic, immodest Western religion. And I realize that most of the ways we “do church” are culture specific rather than biblically mandated. But there are other questions that trouble me:

1) Are the essentials of biblical faith embraced by new converts to Christ, and do they make them known in love to others? For example, do they embrace and make known that the Bible is the only inspired and infallible written revelation of God, and that Christ is God and was crucified for sin and raised from the dead above all authority?

2) Are the former religious behaviors of converts to Christ, which they may retain, communicating regularly a falsehood about what the convert means and believes?

3) Are words being used by converts that mislead people rather than make the truth plain? Are missionaries and converts following Paul’s commitment

to candor: “But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Corinthians 4:2)?

I may be wrong about a Bible-minimizing connection between seeker-driven pastors and radically contextualizing missionaries, but it is hard not to see a loss of faith in the power of God’s Word when I hear that the Bible is not preached at home, and when I read from the frontiers: “We have little hope in our lifetime to believe for a major enough cultural, political and religious change to occur in our context such that Muslims would become open to entering Christianity on a wide scale.”

Let us pray for the Holy Spirit to come in power in our day for the sake of powerful displays of the glory of Christ in the declaration of the Word of God where those glories are revealed with infallible and converting authority.

**By John Piper. ©Desiring God.
Website: www.desiringGod.org.
Email: mail@desiringGod.org.
Toll Free: 888.346.4700.**
