

Christian beliefs of particular relevance for education in contemporary Europe

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Introduction

Our subject this morning includes different themes, so we can approach it from at least four different directions:

A. Developments and trends in contemporary Europe

If we approach it from this direction, we will look to see which beliefs may be of particular relevance for this Region today as we consider:

- socio-political developments like globalization, mobility, urbanization, fragmentation of the society, obsolescence;
- social trends like privatization, individualism, materialism, event orientation, excessive demand, new search for values; and
- socio-cultural trends like Wellness, Selfness and Mindness.

B. Our standing as Christians and Educators in this society

That will be touched in the Sunday sermon when I will outline what it means to be personally involved in **God's mission today.**

C. The beliefs that we think are of particular relevance for today's society

That is already dealt with by the authors of the Prague Declaration which offers this **summary** of the basic theological topics that seem to be of special relevance, such as: creation, the fall of man, redemption and the church.

D. The beliefs that are important for us as Educators

This approach goes over the mentioned topics from the area of redemption and history of salvation and includes themes like the biblical view of children (children are not only equal but also peer to adults ...) and the biblical thinking about authority.

The general decision we have to make is whether we want to approach the issue (i) from the reality of the world and ask the Bible how we should respond to it or (ii) from the Bible and its fundamental message and ask, what does this mean for us and our being as Christians and educators.

Both ways are possible and legitimate! But I am prefer the second way, because (i) asking the Bible concrete questions restricts the answers to areas of interest that we have already identified and (ii) asking more openly for "Beliefs of particular relevance" we have a greater chance of hearing what we do not expect to hear (and a greater danger of hearing what we may not want to hear!). Evangelists tend to say that we have fundamental questions and that the Bible is given to provide answers to them but the Bible raises questions that we would otherwise never have!

Asking what my best contribution as a theologian to this assembly could be, I decided to draw attention to the fourfold 'Only' that the Reformation has set forth as the fundamentals of redemption and discipleship. The Reformers talked of: 'solus Christus' (Christ alone), 'sola fide' (faith alone), 'sola gratia' (grace alone) and 'sola scriptura' (scripture alone). The first two of these are fundamentals of redemption and the last two are fundamentals of discipleship.

1. Fundamentals of Redemption

1.1. Only Christ

We as evangelicals have got used to the expression "fourfold only" so that we are not aware of the fact that this is a contradiction in itself.

How can Christian existence stand *only* on Christ and in the same time *only* on faith / grace / scripture? The

answer is that the only of 'Christ only' does not broadly describe the content / fundament of faith.

Of course there is not only Christ, but also the Father and Holy Spirit. Likewise there is not only grace but also sanctification and there is not only the scripture but also fellowship, prayer and mission.

The "Only" of the Reformation is not exclusive but it confines each of these four settings against everything and everyone that could be set in its place.

"Only Christ" does not confine Christ against the Father and the Holy Spirit but against everything that could displace Christ as the only one through whom the Trinitarian God causes salvation. That needs not only to be stated and to be confessed but again and again we need to pray through that and to worship about that. Only through Christ - by no one else (also no church) and by nothing else (also no sanctification!) does the Father bring about salvation. And no one else does the Holy Spirit confess as the redeemer.

That is why Paul says "*For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ*" (1.Cor.3,11)¹. This means that in Christ is rooted our redemption (and because of that He is in the centre of the redemptive history). To say that to this audience seems to be like evangelizing Billy Graham. But I am convinced that here we are facing a big new challenge because, in the broad stream of pietistic-evangelical-charismatic religiousness, Christ as redeemer is in danger of being pushed out of the focus!

In the pietist tradition in which I grew up, we had a focus on Christ as Redeemer but we have now moved away from this through, for a time, a charismatic focus on the Holy Spirit and now to a new and exclusive focus on the Father. And this Father is such a loving and hugging one that we do not any longer need a Redeemer! Listen to the words of the songs! Listen to the sermons!

Because of this, we need to bring Christ as the Redeemer back to the focus, incorporated in a balanced doctrine of the Holy Trinity. This doctrine is summarised in the Prague Declaration A3.1:

We affirm that there is one God in three persons: God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

The existence of God provides the foundation for human knowledge through relationship with Him.

The existence of one God as three persons provides the foundation for human individuality as well as for relationships in community.

And to understand redemption we must bring back into our minds what the Prague Declaration outlines about the Fall of man.

By Christ we come to the core of the gospel (1.Cor.2,1-2):

"When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

The literal translation would be, "I proclaimed to you the mystery (μυστηριον) of God". Use of the word 'mystery' shows that the Gospel is not something that can be understood and explicated. Even we as evangelicals generally give the impression that we can easily describe what living as a Christian is about! We make it all so simple! But it is a mystery!

Mystery is not the same as secret. A secret is no longer interesting once it has been shared. A mystery is shared by some and (i) we can never fully understand it and (ii) it remains always interesting and it can be discussed again and again.

That is the reason why I prefer not to build what I say this morning on the Prague Declaration. It is a valuable and necessary document! Somewhere things must be written clearly but the danger of documents like this is that they can mislead us into thinking that we understand what we have written. It is in clear theological terms and so we feel that we can handle it and do something with it.

But that is not how incarnation works. It is a mystery that we need to think about and to pray about. That is not an intellectual experience but a process in which we will be touched by God and be led to confess our sins. It is a process that will bring us down to our knees and make us cry.

The mystery of God is not really understandable for us but it must be shared in a stammering way. The

¹ all citations from New International Version

message is that God becomes man ... and God dies! This ultimately unsearchable mystery that keeps many questions open and without answers is the fundamental of Christian faith.

This mystery can be approached from different directions. For example, there is the way of “*eloquence or superior wisdom*” that Paul mentions. That is possible! But Paul decided to go another way: to bring them in touch with Jesus. Paul knew that the act of salvation cannot be declared. The only way to get an idea about it is to get known to Jesus / to get an idea about how God is, how God acts in his presence. This means that to understand the fundamental of faith means to get in touch with Jesus / to understand more and more him and his way, his being, his character.

It is all about Jesus! That is the core “belief of particular relevance for Christian education in contemporary Europe” - as it was before and will be forever.

The calling for Christian Educators is to proclaim Christ! But not only with words but also and more than that by loving with his love.

Closely linked with the “Only Christ” is the ...

1.2 Only Grace

Grace means that the law is executed not on the guilty person but on the person who has the title!

‘Only Christ’ means that no one can bring salvation other than Jesus alone. ‘Only Grace’ means that it is not only impossible to contribute to our salvation, but there is even nothing we can do so that redemption takes effect for us. Not even the longing for salvation can be generated by us ourselves! We totally depend on God not only in creating salvation but also in making it effectual for us.

Here we have an ongoing challenge. We as evangelicals understand that being a Christian means to live a life for the glory of God. We know that it matters how we live and what we do. And that’s all true! But at the same time, we must be aware of the fact that all our activities grow from the ground of our redemption and are no way part of the redeeming activities. Everything we as born-again Christians are doing is about building up the kingdom and it is about the salvation of others - but never about our own salvation.

What does that mean for our lives as Christians and educators?

First let us never cease praying and worshipping about it. Let us celebrate our Redeemer in our midst. And let others see through watching our lives what grace is.

Again, nothing is as relevant for today’s Europe as the eternal biblical message of grace. Look at the movies and the computer-games and understand that there is no grace in the media and in everything that influences our young people most and shapes their minds.

I am convinced that getting a smell, an idea of what grace is, is the only way for people to get an idea of what the Prague Declaration outlines in A3.3 - A3.6: Being created in the image of God, the fall and redemption.

Everything is true that is written there. Read it and believe it! But what that really means can only be sensed if people see it as something that grace responds to. And grace cannot be understood as an intellectual teaching but by seeing / watching / sensing how grace makes the difference in the lives of Christians.

2. Fundamentals of discipleship

2.1 Only Faith

A fundamental of everything we are and do is that God believes in us and not that we believe in God. It is about God’s faith, not about our faith.

Ps.146,6: “...*the LORD, who remains faithful forever ...*” (נֶאֱמַר = Faith)

Romans 3,3: “*What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God’s faithfulness?*” (πιστιν)

Our faith is donated. And it is not first something we are doing, but rather, a life of faith is a life of dedication.

Luke 9 is the chapter in which Jesus explicates what dedication is.

Luce 9,59-60: “*He said to another man, “Follow me.” But the man replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of*

God.”

This man is in principle willing to follow Jesus. But he is fearful of total dedication. The reason is that he sees a conflict between discipleship and his duties to his family. Now he is trying to find a way to make both happen: Discipleship and caring for his family: *“first let me go and bury my father.”* That does not mean that he had to handle the funeral of his father who just has passed away. It is a Hebrew saying that means: “I would very much like to go with you. But for the time being I need to care for my father. My wife can’t do it alone.” Maybe he was bed-ridden ... “But when Daddy will be gone - can’t take more than 6 months or a year - then I will be free and ready to go with you.”

But Jesus said: *“Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”*

A harsh word: “There are enough people that can care for your father. People who are spiritually dead. You have a calling to a special ministry in which you will find the live that you are convened to. If you do not follow me you will miss the overpowering live you are called to.”

We do not know the circumstances. Maybe there were brothers that could care for the father ... But the point is that Jesus says: “It will all be taken care of. You shall dedicate yourself totally to me and I will make sure that it will be done what needs to be done.”

Jesus asks for a vote of confidence: “Do you trust me - that I know the circumstances you are living in - that I know about your old father - that I am able to arrange your life in the best way if you allow me to take control?”

And “I do not ask for your willingness to serve / discipline / good intentions / effort. I want you. I want you to trust me! I want you to dedicate your live to me. On this basis we will then discuss how we best organize your life.”

The call of Jesus is first of all a calling to Him and not a calling to activities.

That is so important to understand for us evangelical leaders and movers! To understand and to teach (!) that activities are not the essentials of Christian live but living in dependence from God!

In church life and youth ministry, we again and again have to prove whether some activities are run only because we want to see activities. We must not keep young people away from life in dedication to God by keeping them busy with our activities!

At the same time, we must communicate that discipleship always means to be part of God’s mission and that includes activities. If there is no visible difference between the life a Christian lives from the life he would live if he were not a Christian, he fails in a way.

But confronting those people, we must not firstly call them to more activities but ask for their dedication!

And all that needs the fundamental of our own total dedication. That is what the Prague Declaration briefly mentions in A3.6 and 7:

... only by faith in Christ can we experience true freedom and the process of becoming more Christlike.

... We affirm that those who have faith in God through Christ are called to live as the people of God in our contemporary world. This involves a calling to serve other people, especially children, the poor and the disadvantaged, and to be a transforming influence within society.

2.2 Only Scripture

The Prague Declaration states in A3.4:

We affirm that God reveals Himself to human beings in different, non-contradictory ways ... in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments which the Holy Spirit inspired and interprets ... We are subject to the final authority of the Scriptures and are therefore not on our own in a purely human pursuit of knowledge, understanding and wisdom ...

What we need to understand and to teach:

1. We do not believe in the Bible (!)

... but in Jesus. I know that this is risky to say amongst Evangelicals as we see the Bible as the Holy Scripture. Yes, it is the Holy Scripture! But to believe means to live in a personal relationship and our

relationship exists with the personal God and not with a book. We can't and we must not believe in the Bible as believing in the Bible would be idolatry.

2. The way in which the Bible is reliable / unfailing

2. Timothy 3,16-17

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

God did not give us the Bible to answer speculative questions, to offer a clear model to understand the world or to clarify any scientific detail of creation.

But to equip us for the task God is giving us to fulfill. That is done by

- *Teaching* The Bible helps us to understand God, his activities, his way of dealing with human beings and his intention for this world (some of that summarized in the Prague Declaration);
- *Rebuking* helps us to see and understand where we do not live according to our calling; and
- *Correcting* gives us the possibility to think and to act in line with God's order and according to our calling as disciples.

All church history as well as today's experience prove that the Bible does exactly this and that this is what it is given for! And that is the proof of its credibility for the purpose it has been given to us. That's what we can rely on!

3. Why and how the Bible is the word of God

The Bible is like frozen fish – all vitamins and food proteins are in it but, as long it is frozen, it is not food! It needs the microwave oven of the Holy Spirit to make it what we can eat. Without that, we cannot eat it – we can hit our neighbour with it but we cannot eat it! The Bible can therefore be seen as the frozen word of God!

Our use of the Bible must reflect this understanding so that young people may learn that from us. They are shaped by our way of using scripture. They feel ...

- whether we are willing to be surprised by the Bible or if we always read from it the old, always-right but lifeless teaching;
- whether we are willing to be corrected by the Bible or if we read our understanding into the texts;
- whether we abuse the Bible to keep a traditional view on the world alive or if we allow it to say what God wants us to say through the texts; and
- whether we make the Bible an idol or receive it thankfully and respectfully as an incredible and precious gift from God.

Let us encourage young people by ...

- being honest and admitting that reading the Bible is not always exciting but sometimes boring; and
- sharing interesting observations and thrilling detections (including those we do not fully understand ...)

I have tried to describe the core of the always and eternally relevant gospel.

You will find ways to describe what that means for educational work.

But whatever you plan to do, be assured that Europe is much more on God's agenda and part of his constitution than God is on the agenda and constitution of Europe!

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