

Trevor McIlwain: Confirming Believers in the Christian Faith

By David Hesselgrave

Talk to almost any pastor or missionary about problems faced in local congregations at home or abroad. In all likelihood one problem will have to do with getting seekers and new converts into the fellowship of the local church. Another will likely have to do with transforming church attenders into involved, mature members of the congregation. Our emphasis and efforts on "follow-up" have perhaps helped to narrow the gap between mass evangelism and the local church but have not closed it by any means.

Our endeavors to make the worship service appealing and meaningful have in many cases resulted in increased attendance on Sunday mornings but have not necessarily increased membership and enhanced spiritual growth.

Our concentration on discipleship has enabled some believers to grow in the faith and go out in witness, but all too often the majority of Christians still sit on the sidelines preoccupied with their personal questions and difficulties.

Our group Bible studies certainly have had a positive impact, but all too often they neglect basic principles of Bible interpretation and are detached from the program of the local church.

In spite of these and still other attempts to make real believers out of sincere seekers, mature saints out of nominal Christians, and New Testament churches out of ordinary congregations, there is still much room for improvement. There always will be, but that does not justify the status quo. Our present problems need attention. They have to do, not so much with what we have done, but with what we have failed to do. Not so much with our "sins" of commission, as with our "sins" of omission.

The Scope of the Great Commission

When our Lord gave the Great Commission he claimed all authority in heaven and earth and then commanded his followers to go into all the world and make disciples by baptizing and teaching all that he commanded (Matt. 28: 18-20). In one sense, of course, Muslims are correct in noting that Jesus never married a wife, fathered children, ran a business, or commanded an army. In another sense, they are

dead wrong. He has a bride, many children, a going business, an everlasting kingdom and an army that is advancing around the world. All of that because of who he was, what he did, and what he commanded his followers to do. Since the obedience of his followers has not been total, however, progress has come by fits and starts. The command itself was both extensive and intensive. Anything approaching full obedience would have resulted in a very different situation both in the world and in the church itself.

Only very gradually and after considerable controversy did the churches that came out of the Reformation reach a general consensus that Great Commission responsibility extends to all believers and all churches. And only after that consensus was reached did they begin to concentrate on "all the world" and "all nations." For a century now, much thought has been given to the scope of the field--who needs to be reached, where they are located, and how to reach them in the shortest possible time.

Today's Christians are beneficiaries of those who in the more distant past have thought deeply about who bears the responsibility and shares the privilege of obedience to the Great Commission. We are also beneficiaries of those who, in more recent days, have given serious consideration to ways of thinking about the world--about people groups and their characteristics, numbers and locations. Now it is incumbent upon us to give more serious consideration to the fact that the Great Commission is intensive as well as extensive, that what is to be done is as comprehensive as who is to do it and to whom it is to be done.

Picking up the thread of the previous chapter, we now take note of three facts. First, the most complete statement of the Great Commission is found in Matthew 28:16-20. Other statements are equally important in that they too are given by the Christ who possesses all authority. But on the basis of a hermeneutical principle that less clear and comprehensive statements are to be understood in the light of those that are more so, the Matthean version becomes especially important.

Second, the sole imperative and central activity in Commission as recorded in Matthew 28 is to "make disciples." "Go" could be translated "going" or "as you go," but takes any imperatival force it may have from the main verb. "Baptizing" and "teaching" are also participles but clearly do take the imperatival force from the main verb. In fact, the grammatical construction would indicate that this is

the way disciples are to be made. But the end product is to be disciples--not "decisions" or "converts" or "believers" or "acceptors," but "disciples." It goes without saying that decision-making, conversion, belief, and acceptance are all involved, but the objective of the Great Commission is that we make disciples (followers, adherents, learners, students) of the Lord Jesus. Discipleship is not for a "select" few whom we single out; it is for all the "elect" of God in Christ!

Third, our Lord uses the word "all" three times in the Great Commission--all authority, all nations or peoples, and all he commanded. Why is it that we emphasize all authority and all nations, but when it comes to preaching and teaching we settle for as little of what Christ has commanded as possible? Jesus himself emphasized the whole of Scripture. His teaching was replete with references to the Old Testament. He said, "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me" (John 5:39). His promise of the Spirit secured the authority of the New Testament. To the apostles he said,

But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak of His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He glorify Me; for He shall take of Mine, and shall disclose it to you. (John 16:13-14)

Of course, we cannot communicate the whole of Scripture in one sitting. In that sense we will have to be selective. But we should never be selective to the exclusion of the whole or unpalatable parts of the whole. We should never divorce a part of the gospel from the whole of it. Rather, the part that we select and the way that we treat it should direct hearers to the whole of the gospel, to the larger story of Scripture. John Nevius wisely counseled his missionary colleagues to the effect that, when they preached to Chinese who were hearing the Christian message for the first time, unless they themselves could stay on to instruct converts in the faith, they should exhort hearers to accept those who would come later with the teaching of Jesus.

When we preach a very select gospel to unbelievers and reserve complete teaching for a very select group of believers, we create great gaps between decisions and discipleship, between the majority and the mature. Moreover, we do injustice to our mandate.

The Nature of the Church

Our Lord promised that he would build his church and that the gates of Hades would not overpower it (Matt. 16:18). In one sense, the Lord Jesus did not build anything. In another sense, it has been his purpose and plan to build the church from the beginning. Unless we keep this latter truth in mind we lose divine focus and concentrate on building our school or our organization or our program or even "our" church. For a while after the middle of this century churches and especially missions tended to lose focus. However, church growth and then church planting advocates caused us to re-focus on the necessity of growing local congregations around the world. However, a renewed appreciation for the importance of the local church has not always resulted in a better understanding of the nature of the local church.

There are various ways of inquiring into the true nature of the church and its significance for churches today. First and foremost we should engage in a study of ecclesiology, the theology of the church in Scripture. This is especially important because many who serve as pastors and missionaries currently have been converted and nurtured in parachurch organizations and but loosely tied to local congregations. Missiologists especially have noted that many missionary volunteers who pass muster when it comes to Christology and soteriology, flounder and even fail on the field because of their neglect of ecclesiology.

Secondly, we need to reexamine the churches of the New Testament to see where they succeeded, where they failed, and how they were instructed by the apostles. The church of Pentecost (Acts 2:41-47) has been most often held up as a model of the kind of church a Spirit-led church should be. Some other churches we do well to emulate are those in Antioch, Ephesus, Philippi and Thessalonica. But, of course, no local congregation is perfect and so we have much to learn from the shortcomings of these churches and especially of churches such as those in Corinth and the churches in Asia addressed by John in the Revelation 2 and 3.

Thirdly, it is helpful to examine the metaphors used to describe the church in the New Testament. A study of the church as building, bride, body, household etc. is both exciting and instructive.

Fourthly, descriptions of New Testament church life and witness should be undertaken as well. For example, when we compare worship, fellowship and prayer in the New Testament with our understandings

and practices today we find similarities to be sure. But we also find glaring differences.

Of course, the above is sketchy at best. But I mention it because, however New Testament ecclesiology is approached, its study will reveal that one of the greatest weaknesses of the contemporary church has to do with a proper use and knowledge of the Bible itself. After the baptism of about "three thousand souls" on Pentecost, the very first thing Luke mentions is that they "were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching. . . ." (Acts 2:41). When Paul writes of the duty of the "person-gifts" of the risen Christ to his church (i.e., apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers) he indicates that they should equip the saints for the work of service, the building of the body and the unity of the faith (Eph. 4:11-12). When he exhorts Ephesian believers to be prepared for spiritual warfare he puts special emphasis on the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God (Eph. 6:16-17). When the writer of Hebrews wants to teach Jewish congregations about the priesthood of Christ, he notes their inability to digest "solid food" and scolds them for being spiritual babies when they ought to be teachers (Heb. 5:12).

What about our churches today? It is said that the average home in the United States has at least four or five Bibles. Most churches have Bibles in every pew. Many congregations have confirmation classes and most have Sunday Schools. Christian book stores stock a variety of modern Bible translations. Home Bible studies abound. Nevertheless, one of the most astounding commentaries frequently heard is that when it comes to the Scriptures, American laypeople today are less well informed than their forebears and even than some non-literate Christians in the Two-Thirds world! Upon becoming acquainted with the churches of our country, the Lutheran theologian Harry Wendt became so appalled with what he identified as biblical illiteracy (Luther confirmation notwithstanding) that he risked all his resources in developing the Divine Drama materials and establish Crossways International (now headquartered in Minneapolis). It is interesting that, though these studies have been developed at three graded levels, none is for children. Wendt's philosophy is that it is the duty of adults to teach children but that before they are equipped to teach they will first have to learn themselves.

Equally arresting is the recent history of New Tribes Mission on which we will expand in a moment. After developing a Bible study approach called Firm Foundations and designed to confirm Palawano believers in the Christian faith and discovering that the Holy Spirit had used the

Word of God to mature them in a remarkable way, Trevor McIlwain was returned to the States and given the task of preparing materials for some 3000 New Tribes missionaries working on seventeen fields around the world. One of the fascinating aspects of this history is that as American Christians and churches have become aware of Firm Foundations materials and their effectiveness in other lands, there has been a dramatic demand for the same study materials right here at home. "Bread" sent across the waters is washing back upon our shores to sustain the senders!

Trevor McIlwain and the Palawano Churches of the Philippines

Currently, Trevor McIlwain is the International Coordinator for Church Planting and Evangelism with New Tribes Mission. He is also author of the multi-volume series *Building on Firm Foundations*. The version being used among English-speaking people begins with a volume entitled *Foundations: Creation to Christ* but translations are also available or in progress in Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, Rumanian (for their public school system), Chinese and many tribal languages.

In 1965 the Trevor McIlwains left their native Australia for the Philippines. They were to take up work among the Palawano tribes people living on the island of Palawan in the southwestern region of that country. A work had been established among the Palawanos shortly after the end of World War II and as many as 40 small scattered churches already existed. However, the churches were beset with most of the problems that afflicted larger Palawano society - divorce and remarriage, drunkenness and much else. More than that, there seemed to be widespread misunderstanding of what it really means to be a Christian. In spite of the best efforts of the missionaries to instruct and exhort believers, many of them were caught in a cycle of repenting of their evil ways; functioning outwardly as Christians for a while; falling back into the old ways; being challenged by missionaries and pastors; being "revived." and starting the cycle all over again.

To understand this state of affairs, one must be aware at least two factors that contributed to it. First, for decades the Palawanos had been a downtrodden and afflicted people. Long years before many had been murdered and maimed by marauding Moros (Moslem sea warriors). Then came settlers who emigrated from surrounding islands and forced them from their homes back into inhospitable foothills and mountains. But the worst was still to come. The Japanese invasion

inaugurated a period of rape, devastation and death previously unknown. Finally, along with the rest of the Philippines, Palawan was liberated by the "Amerikans." The liberators took pride in protecting their "little Palawano brothers," but their withdrawal once again left tribes people to fend for themselves. Then an American missionary arrived who displayed a great love and concern for them. Something of a "people movement" ensued. Several thousand Palawanos professed conversion, were baptized and organized into local churches. As one Palawano put it, "We would have done anything for that first missionary. If he had asked us to cut our fingers off, we would have gladly done it for him" (McIlwain 1987, 12). That being the case, one can appreciate the fact that conversions stemmed from very mixed motives.

Second, it must be understood that succeeding missionaries did everything they knew how to instruct Palawano church members as to the true meaning of conversion and baptism, and what it meant to live the Christian life. Even if one could fault the pioneer missionary for inadequate instruction before baptizing converts and organizing churches--difficult to do given the openness of the people and the scarcity of workers--it certainly would be impossible to criticize successors because they did what the vast majority of dedicated missionaries would do in similar circumstances! In fact, initially Trevor McIlwain himself employed what we might call "standard methodology" in order to correct the situation.

Applying Instructional "Correctives"

Then the McIlwains took up residence among the Palawanos in the mid-sixties, and he was given special responsibility for instructing church members and elders from the Scriptures in such a way as to bring them to Christian maturity. He began by traveling among the churches and questioning believers concerning their understanding of God and his plan of salvation: "What must one do to be saved?: "What if a person believes but is not baptized or does not attend church regularly, is that person saved?; and, "What if one truly trusts Christ but gets drunk or commits adultery. Could he be saved?" Answers to questions such as these revealed that Palawano Christians really did not understand Bible doctrine and based their salvation on a mixture of faith and works.

After some months, another approach was introduced, especially with church leaders. Realizing that Palawanos would always agree with a

teacher and that they would have to take a stand against teachers of false cults who were beginning to arrive in increasing numbers, McIlwain began teaching biblical truth concerning salvation and then contradicting that truth by teaching error. At first this confused his hearers but, gradually, church leaders learned to think for themselves and discern the difference between truth and error.

Over a period of time, many Palawanos came to a better understanding of the cardinal doctrine of justification by faith. Many who had merely professed Christ were truly saved and many more received assurance of salvation. While this was indeed gratifying to the missionaries the task of bringing so many scattered "babes in Christ" to spiritual maturity still seemed staggering. So McIlwain abandoned his itinerant ministry, settled in the middle of six small churches, and began to teach the Scripture topically and expositively, verse by verse.

Since the churches were attended by true believers, mere professors and some unbelievers, McIlwain singled out the Gospel of John for intensive study. Initially there was considerable enthusiasm for the study. However, problems cropped up almost from the start:

John 1:1--"In the beginning was the Word. . . ." The Palawanos did not understand the meaning of "beginning" or "Word." They had not understood that Jesus was with the Father before the beginning.

John 1:3--"All things were made by him. . . ." They had not understood that "God" in the first chapter of Genesis included Jesus.

John 1:11--"He came unto his own. . . ." Without knowing about Abraham, Israel and early promises of a Messiah this verse had little meaning for Palawano people.

Similar problems surfaced when McIlwain selected the book of Romans for verse-by-verse expositional study. Whether approached topically or textually, expositional teaching of John, Romans and other New Testament books resulted in frustration as time and time again the teacher was forced to go back to the Old Testament in order to explain the New. Clearly there had to be a better way.

A "New View" of the "Old Book"

McIlwain recounts how he began to awaken to the fact that the Bible needed to be considered as a whole:

. . . as God's complete unified message to all mankind. I realized the Old Testament is not a compilation of interesting stories to be used only as types and illustrations of New Testament truth. The Old Testament is the logical introduction, foundation, and authority for the story of Christ recorded in the New Testament. Old Testament is by far the most important source of interpretive background material for the historical accounts of the New Testament.

Just as God has given us two lips and both necessary for clear verbal [oral--ed.] communication, even so both Old and New Testaments are indispensable for the communication of God's complete message to the world. (McIlwaine 1987, 67-68)

This "new view" of the Bible entailed a number of concepts which have been fleshed out in McIlwain's subsequent works:

1) The entire Bible centers in God's message concerning his Son, Jesus Christ. It is "His-story" from the first verse in Genesis to the last verse in Revelation. This means, for example, that though missionaries should learn all they can about the culture, folklore and belief system of the people, it is still more important to understand the prophecies, types and figures of the Old Testament itself. For example, the key both to understanding the biblical message of Christ and communicating that message to the people example, is not the discovery of redemptive analogies in the culture but the disclosure of redemptive analogies in the Old Testament.

2) Not only the message, but also the literary styles and forms of Scripture, are essential to proper understanding and effective instruction. In giving us the Bible, God as the Supreme Teacher has provided us with the best ways to captivate human imagination and effect clear communication. The church errs when it ignores the methods of presentation employed by the divine Author of Scripture and completely reorganizes biblical subject matter and employs its own methods of instruction.

3) The Bible is the historical record of God's acts. God has not only spoken, he has acted and interacted with people--real people over a long period of time and representing a variety of cultures. Moreover,

he acted on behalf of his chosen people in special ways. Therefore, people from any culture and time can identify with the biblical record. It is especially important that God's people take note of that identification.

4) The method of the apostles underscores the importance of these principles. They emphasized the words and works of God in history. Beginning with Peter on Pentecost and proceeding through the book of Acts and the Epistles it is clear that the apostolic method was to ground the Gospel in history, especially that of the Old Testament. Not to emulate them in this regard is tantamount to erecting a building without a foundation.

In short, then, McIlwain became convinced that biblical theology--not just theology that is biblical--is foundational both to communicating the gospel to unbelievers and to confirming the church in the Christian faith. To neglect biblical theology is to invite misunderstanding, syncretism and immaturity.

The Chronological Teaching Approach

Based upon the foregoing experiences and principles, the "Chronological Teaching Approach" was developed. Though it allows for topical teaching aimed at correcting specific errors in doctrine and practice, it highlights biblical theology, the chronology of Scripture, and narrative communication. The entire course of study is divided into four phases as in Figure 6 (adapted from McIlwain 1981, 12a-12-c and 1987, 131 by Richard L. Langston).

Figure 6 (*I will need to scan and send...GM*)

The Chronological Teaching Outline

As a review of the outline above will reveal, the first four phases of the Chronological Teaching materials are panoramic and cover the entire Bible in a relatively short period of time. Phase I emphasizes salvation and targets unbelievers, mixed groups (believers and unbelievers) and new believers. It is predicated on the conviction that saving faith--faith that bases salvation on Christ and his finished work alone--involves an understanding of God and his dealings with mankind in history. It therefore begins with creation in Genesis and ends with the ascension in the book of Acts. It emphasizes the nature of God, the meaning of sin, and God's solution (Jesus Christ) as revealed in the

historical events and teachings of the whole Bible. For example, the giving of, and response to, the Law is emphasized because ". . . through the law we become conscious of sin" (Romans 3:20). The Old Testament promises of a Messiah and redemptive types are emphasized because they are fulfilled in Christ. The chronology of the Scriptures becomes important because it reveals the unfolding of God's redemptive plan. And so on. Taught in this way, unbelievers better understand what is involved in turning from false faith or no faith to saving faith in the Lord Jesus. Taught in this way, whether in mixed groups or by themselves, believers better understand what is involved in instructing unbelievers concerning God's plan of salvation and therefore are enabled to continue the process on their own!

Phase II also focuses on the fulfillment of the promises and types of the Old Testament in the Person and work of the Redeemer as satisfying the requirements of a righteous and holy God. Unlike Phase I, however, the emphasis here is more on the security of the believer rather than on salvation per se. Phase II also deals with the Person and work of the Holy Spirit as revealed in the Old Testament and gospels.

Phase III provides an introduction to the book of Acts with its story of the ministry of the apostles, the development of the early Church, and the geographical spread of Christianity from Jerusalem and its environs to Rome itself. Just as the Old Testament and Gospels provide a foundation for an understanding of the New Testament, so the book of Acts provides the background for understanding the Epistles.

Phase IV is also directed at new believers and highlights the central portions of the remaining books of the New Testament with special attention being given to the functioning of the church and the walk of the believer.

Finally, Phases I, VI and VII are for "maturing believers." They emphasize, in order, sanctification as taught from Genesis to the ascension; an in-depth study of Acts and how the Holy Spirit worked in the early experiences of the Church and in the life and ministry of Paul; and, the remainder of the New Testament with a more in-depth study of what we might call Christian discipline in the church and the believer.

Conclusion

As might be expected, McIlwain's work is not without its critics. From the perspective of some it is too intensive and too extensive. Others feel that, though McIlwain encourages an understanding of culture the approach is not sufficiently culture-sensitive. Still others can be expected to take exception to its doctrinal stance, reflecting as it does the New Tribes Mission statement of faith.

Nevertheless, I readily admit to a special appreciation for McIlwain's work. Shortly after establishing the New Tribes Mission in 1942, founder Paul Fleming spoke in chapel at my seminary. He was indeed a man of vision and passion, but he greatly oversimplified the task of world evangelization leaving the strong impression that the message of John 3:16 is sufficient for its completion and that anyone, with or without special gifts, abilities and training, can communicate John 3:16. It did not require an extended time on the mission field to realize that that simply is not the case. It is especially significant that now, after fifty years, New Tribes Mission supplies a much needed corrective.

There is yet another reason for my appreciation. At one stage of my ministry in Japan I had the unique opportunity to initiate a Bible study for as many of one hundred of Japan's outstanding technologists. Like McIlwain I chose to begin with the Gospel of John. Like him I found that their lack of background in the Scriptures rendered the study quite incomprehensible to all but a few. Unlike him, I did not have the opportunity to make a new start. Some good came out of that study, but in more recent years it has often occurred to me that something similar to McIlwain's model would have been much more appropriate and, perhaps, more productive as well.

Finally, I trust that it will not escape the notice of my readers that, both in the approach of Weber and that of McIlwain, the evangelism of unbelievers and the confirmation of believers are closely allied. After all, the same Holy Spirit uses the same Divine Word to accomplish both ministries. And both are aspects of one Great Commission.