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Truth, Allegiance, and Power Dimensions in Christian Discipleship: From a Language of Priority to a Balanced Approach

Introduction

Christian witness and discipleship are associated with truth, allegiance, and power dimensions. Each of these three dimensions has its specific concern. The concern of the truth dimension is to counter ignorance or error in order to bring people to a correct understanding about Jesus Christ. The concern of the allegiance dimension is to bring people to an undivided commitment and growing obedience to God. The power dimension, sometimes referred to as spiritual warfare or the Great Controversy, is concerned with releasing people from Satan's captivity and bringing them to freedom in Jesus Christ. (Kraft 2009:446). God not only uses his power to hinder Satan, but also to help people understand his love. Although each of these three dimensions has its specific concern, all three need to be interrelated for wholistic spiritual growth. Discipleship is a lifelong process but for the fact that these dimensions are also punctiliar events in the course of Christian maturity, they will be sometimes referred to as encounters.

The truth and allegiance dimensions have generally been emphasized more than the power dimension in Christian witness. This approach to spiritual growth thus seems to show preference to these two dimensions instead of stressing that all three are necessary for holistic Christian maturity. Too often little if any attention is paid to the power dimension as if Christian discipleship rests only on the truth and allegiance one confesses. Such a strategy does great damage by neglecting an essential pillar—power—on which Christian discipleship must also rest. By neglecting the power dimension, the focus is on cognitive knowledge about God and some aspects of the Christian life without any tangible experience of these aspects in everyday life (Kraft 2005b:102). Because of this faulty dis-

cipleship process, converts do not experience the type of completeness in Christ that enables them to continue to stand firm on Christian principles during times of crises.

The purpose of this paper is to point to the need for a move from an unbalanced emphasis on cognitive belief to a balanced use of all three dimensions in Christian witness and discipleship. One of the challenges faced in achieving this purpose is that only a handful of authors have written on the interrelatedness of these three dimensions, the most prolific being Charles H. Kraft.

The Nature and Aims of the Three Dimensions

Truth Dimension

The truth dimension has to do with understanding. Before surrendering their lives to Christ, people need a certain level of understanding of scriptural truth. Jesus spent an important part of his ministry in the teaching of truth (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount: Matt 5-7; the parables: Luke 15; 18.1-14; 19:11-26; Matt 11:1; Luke 4:31-32; John 15:1-17). His intention was for his hearers to grow in their understanding of the person and will of God in order for them to have a better relationship with him. He focused more on knowledge grounded in relationship and experience with God than on head knowledge alone (John 8:32; 15:1-10).

Although Pentecostals tend to lay the emphasis on power, truth is the dimension usually emphasized in Christian witness today. But unlike Jesus, Christian witness tends to focus heavily on cognitive knowledge assuming that people who hear about the various aspects of the Christian life will have sufficient reasons to convert to Christ. Unfortunately, there is no automatic transfer from knowledge *about* Christian beliefs and lifestyle to the actual experience of these aspects of Christianity. The cognitive and informational dimensions of truth, although necessary, are often strongly emphasized to the detriment of relational and experiential truth. In most cases, people's minds are filled with pieces of information forgetting that "whenever the Scripture speaks of knowledge and truth, it is referring to *experiential* knowledge and truth, not merely the *intellectual* byproducts of these factors" (Kraft 2005b:107). A related problem is that when Christian witness focuses primarily on numerical growth, it often pays little attention to discipleship and mentoring. As a result, converts usually do not apply their intellectual knowledge to their day-to-day challenges.

Allegiance Dimension

The biblical teachings are primarily concerned with the believer's relationship to God. Throughout the Scriptures, God constantly calls people

to commit themselves to him as their primary allegiance. The allegiance dimension is thus focused on growing in an intimate relationship with God. Hearing and accepting cognitively the truth as it is in the Bible is not the end of the Christian experience. After consenting to the truth that the Bible teaches, converts need to constantly pay close attention to their experiential growth in Christ (2 Pet 3:18). One of the dangers in spiritual development is making truth and faith something that is merely discussed rather than something that moves us into allegiance to Christ. Although the goal of the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20) is to make disciples by teaching them to obey the truth as it is presented in the Scripture, disciples are made only when converts pledge full allegiance (commitment and obedience) to Christ and continue to do so everyday of their lives. In contrast, members too often are people who have made an intellectual assent to a body of truth and who have been baptized without any further follow up toward full commitment to the lordship of Christ. Ellen White insists that unless believers choose only the disposition of Christ—where Christ’s interests are identified with theirs—they are not fit to be called disciples (1958:110). For that reason, the allegiance dimension is a vital piece of Christian experience; for without this continual commitment and obedience to Christ, there is no spiritual life.

Allegiance to Christ is a lifelong process that starts at conversion and moves the convert into a more intimate relationship with Christ and other believers. The goal of this process is to grow in the likeness of Christ. As this happens, the new and growing relationship with Christ replaces any other allegiance that was primary in the convert’s life before he/she met Christ. This is evident in Christ’s call to make him first in everything. He is radical in his call to discipleship, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate [love me more than] father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Kraft expresses well the uniqueness and the importance of the allegiance dimension of the Christian life in comparison to its truth and power dimensions.

The allegiance-relationship dimension is quite distinct from the other two dimensions. For example, no one becomes a Christian simply through knowledge or power. As James says, even demons have enough understanding to cause them to tremble in fear (Jas. 2:19). They have all the knowledge they need but none of the relationship required for salvation. Yet we are often taught to witness primarily by increasing the person’s knowledge, as if knowledge is going to bring him/her into the Kingdom. . . . We can’t simply *click into* a relationship on the basis of what we know. (Kraft 2005b:105)

Power Dimension

Power encounters generally refer to the warfare between God and Satan. The Bible contains a series of such encounters. Some prominent Old Testament power encounters are found in Exod 5-12 (Moses and Pharaoh), 1 Kgs 18 (Elijah and the prophets of Baal), and Dan 4. In each of these contexts, God saved those who put their hope in him and caused their opponents to recognize his sovereign power. In each of these cases God demonstrated his power over pagan gods through signs and wonders. These signs and wonders became symbols not only of God's supreme power, but also of his presence, protection, and provision. They also became a source of motivation for eye-witnesses to either renew their relationship with God or to acknowledge his supreme authority (Wimber and Springer 1985:30).

Jesus' ministry also included power encounters in order to challenge and defeat the powers of Satan. In fact, his whole ministry was a power encounter because he was at the center of the Great Controversy (White 1940:257). For Jesus, the power of God was not only provided for living a holy life or for salvation, but was also the power for physical and spiritual healing and for restoring every area of a person's life (Wagner 1988:46; Wimber and Springer 1986:75). When John the Baptist sent his disciples to inquire from Christ, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Luke 5:20), Jesus did not answer them with rational arguments. He rather used a demonstration of power in healing the sick, casting out evil spirits, and giving sight to the blind (Luke 5:21).

Spiritual warfare was a natural part of Christ's ministry (Hiebert 2009:407). According to Luke, it was Jesus' usual practice to heal the sick and deliver people from demon possession soon after entering a new territory (Luke 4:33-35, 39; 5:13-15; 6:6-10, 18-19). Because these people were very concerned about spiritual power, he approached them at the point of their concern. He even instructed his disciples to use the same method whenever he sent them to prepare the way for him (Luke 9:1-6; 10:19).

Several accounts in Acts show that power encounters were also a natural part of the apostles' ministry. These power demonstrations either gave credibility to the content of their preaching or at least drew attention to their ministry. In Acts 3:1-9 Peter and John healed a lame beggar and verses 11-26 show how this event gave Peter an audience and how he capitalized on the opportunity to share Jesus Christ. Acts 5:12-16 records that one of the things that attracted people to the early church was the expressions of the power of God at work in the apostles' ministry. Acts 8:4-8 gives a vivid account of the result of power encounters in Philip's ministry in Samaria,

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and *saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said*. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city. (emphasis mine)

Just like biblical peoples, most people today, especially in none-Western societies, also see the world as inhabited by evil spirits that cause trouble if they are not appropriately dealt with (Kraft 2005c:362). As such, the use of power encounters is still necessary for initial conversion. It is also a vital part of the building up of the church (Love 1996:194). According to Kraft, “A Christianity that includes the spiritual dimension is the only one that is truly Biblical” (Kraft 2008:364). Indigenous religions, sometimes referred to as animism, are spirit and power-oriented and form the majority of the world’s religions (Partridge 2005:100); their influences are seen in other religious movements such as New Age, folk Islam, Hinduism, folk Buddhism and even among many professed Christians. Animistic beliefs are structured around the understanding that “the physical world is interpenetrated with spiritual forces both personal and impersonal to the extent that objects carry spiritual significance and events have spiritual causes” (Halverson 1996:37, 38). People who come from these power-oriented religious contexts are immersed in spirit powers, charms, and amulets because they believe they are at the mercy of evil spirits, demons, the evil eye, curses, and other spiritual forces. They live in a constant state of fear of retaliation of the spirits, or the harm an enemy can place on them through some form of spiritual power (Kraft 2008:50). As such, they are more concerned about healing, deliverance, and protection than they are about truth. Therefore, “the Christ who is the remedy for their fears will often be more attractive than the Christ who saves them from their sins” (Kraft 2008:448).

With the majority of the world, including most of the adherents of the major world religions, involved in animistic practices (Kraft 2005a:377), it is crucial to give due consideration to the issue of power encounters. In many instances the success of Christian witness depends on it (Love 1994:88; Wagner 1987:23). On the one hand, when converts from an animistic background “find within Christianity little or none of the spiritual power they crave for the meeting of their needs for healing, blessing, guidance, even deliverance from demons, they continue their preChristian practice of going to shamans, priests, diviners, temples, shrines, and the like for spiritual power” (Kraft 2005c:361). This compromises their allegiance to God and makes their Christianity syncretistic. On the other

hand, some traditional societies put a lot of pressure on their members irrespective of their religious beliefs to take part in some practices that contain unbiblical elements. In Africa for example, John Mbiti points out how the African social structure places an emphasis on community centeredness instead of individualism:

To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community. . . . A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence. To be without one of these corporate elements of life is to be out of the whole picture. (Mbiti 1990:2)

Since full membership and fulfillment in such contexts come for individuals as they participate in family and community relationships (beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, and festivals) (Partridge 2005:127), some converts to Christianity succumb to dual allegiance and syncretism as they continue to practice elements of their former religion. In many instances, an individual's failure to participate in some cultural practices amounts to self-excommunication from the entire life of the community. Any misfortune in the families or clans will be interpreted as the ancestors' unhappiness with this "moral disorder in relationships" (Magesa 1997:81) that led to "disequilibrium of societal peace and harmony" (Ishola 1992:28). In the traditional mindset, such individuals are considered social isolates or deviants because "to be cut off from relationships with one's ancestors is to cease to be a whole person" (Partain 1986:1067). Because the social penalty for refusing to participate in some community rituals could be stiff, many people, out of fear of the penalty prefer to follow the traditional customs (Kraft 2008:33). This being the reality in which many sincere Christian converts find themselves, it is abnormal and even totally unacceptable that the power dimensions of biblical teaching continue to be ignored in Christian witness and discipleship. Spiritual warfare is a reality that Jesus did not ignore in his ministry. He did not see Satan and demonic forces as myths and superstition. He saw these forces as real enemies from which people needed to be set free. Things are different only when converts from an animistic background experience the Christian God as a God of power able to control the enemy spirits and how they interfere in their lives. The worldview of animistic converts to Christianity does not get transformed just by hearing about God's power but by experiencing it personally, for it is "spiritual power to heal, bless and to overcome the power of demonic

spirits that have held animists captive for generations, that really speaks to them" (Kraft 2008:486). According to Alan Tippett, in a power-oriented society, change of faith must be power-demonstrated because many animists need a visible demonstration of the superior power of God to become Christians (1971:81).

Many converts from animism feel that some of their former practices, though clearly unbiblical, are still important in their struggle for human existence both spiritually and materially (Amanze 2003:43). As such, the Adventist Church cannot afford to just condemn these practices as a denial of the Christian faith. With animism becoming a worldwide phenomenon, if the church sticks to the same approach, Christianity will be speaking to the majority of its converts in alien tones. While the Church is right in decrying the unbiblical beliefs and practices associated with dual allegiance and syncretism, it also needs to find effective and biblically appropriate ways to demonstrate that the God of the Bible is more powerful than other gods and spirits. "For people like the Hebrews and most of today's peoples, for whom spiritual power is a primary concern, power encounters are often the clearest way to demonstrate the superiority of God over their spirits and gods" (Kraft 1996:452).

While firmly maintaining biblical integrity, the church in its mission must also be resourceful and flexible in adjusting its methods and procedures to the different contexts of the world in which it finds itself. The Church needs to realize and accept that "a Christianity that [merely] talks about and promises spiritual power but leaves out the experiencing in this area . . . leaves itself open to the problem of dual allegiance" (Kraft and Kraft 1993:350). Unless converts from animistic backgrounds experience a powerful Christianity, many of them will "continue to seek out the old power sources to satisfy their fears and needs" (Bauer 2008:342).

When it comes to dealing with spiritual powers, those involved in Christian witness need to understand that Satan cannot be fought with cognitive knowledge alone. Satanic powers cannot be effectively challenged only by biblical knowledge and truth. They must be opposed by the power of God. Christian witness is done only in part when it simply points out the errors of other religions and fails to deal with the spiritual powers that drive these faiths. Satanic powers must be fought with the power of Christ for those under demonic influence to be converted and freed. The truth that sets free (John 8:32) is an experienced truth and not just an intellectual one (Kraft 2008:488, 489; see also Kraft 2005c:363).

According to Ellen G. White, no one "can doubt that satanic agencies are at work among men with increasing activity to distract and corrupt the mind, and defile and destroy the body" (White 1909:143). But unfortunately,

while the world is filled with these evils, the gospel is too often presented in so indifferent a manner as to make but little impression upon the consciences or the lives of men. Everywhere there are hearts crying out for something which they have not. *They long for a power that will give them mastery over sin, a power that will deliver them from the bondage of evil, a power that will give health and life and peace.* . . . The world needs today what it needed nineteen hundred years ago—a revelation [of the power] of Christ. (White 1909:143, emphasis mine)

Toward a Balanced Approach

Christian discipleship can be likened to a three legged stool. Just as such a stool needs all three legs to stay balanced, Christian discipleship must solidly rest on all its dimensions—truth, allegiance, and power. Truth and allegiance encounters are not the only dimensions portrayed in Scripture.

Jesus spent most of his time teaching truth. . . . As He taught, though, He constantly invited people into greater and greater allegiance to Him and His Father. In conjunction with the teaching of truth and the appeals for allegiance, He regularly freed people from the enemy's captivity through His use of God's power. (Kraft 1996:452)



Figure 1. Discipleship supported by its truth, allegiance, and power dimensions.

Instead of the truth and power dimensions supporting the allegiance dimension as suggested by Kraft (2005b:104), I submit that it is all three—truth, allegiance, and power dimensions—that are intended to support the believer's relationship with God. A truth encounter (knowledge) is the appropriate antidote for ignorance and/or error. An allegiance encounter (commitment to Jesus Christ) is what is needed to replace any other previous allegiance in a person's life and keep him/her from dual allegiance. A power encounter (spiritual warfare) is the appropriate antidote for satanic captivity and harassment. Effective Christian witness is not a matter of either/or when it comes to appealing to these three dimensions.

We can't *fight* a wrong primary allegiance with either knowledge or power. We can only fight one allegiance with another allegiance. Likewise, we cannot fight error or ignorance with either an allegiance or with power. These must be fought with knowledge and truth. So also with power. We cannot fight power with knowledge or truth, only with power. In other words, we *fight* allegiance with allegiance, truth with truth, and power with power. (Kraft 2005b:100)

In another article, Kraft emphasizes the need to use all three encounters together, not separately in missionary witness. This is how he phrases the interconnectedness of these encounters:

People need freedom from the enemy to (1) open their mind to receive and understand truth (2 Cor 4:4) and (2) to release their wills so they can commit themselves to God. However, they can't understand and apply Christian truth, nor can they exercise power, without a continuing commitment to God. Nor can they maintain the truth and their allegiance without freedom from the enemy won through continual power encounter. We constantly need each of the three dimensions in our lives. (Kraft 2009:448)

Biblical Christianity emphasizes truth, allegiance, and power. Western Christianity, which influences the rest of the Christian world is very strong on the truth dimension, a little weak on the allegiance dimension, but very deficient in dealing with spiritual powers. For wholistic Christian witness, none of the three dimensions can be de-emphasized or neglected. Though prominent in Scripture, truth is never an end in and of itself. It is always balanced by concern for an intimate relationship with God and his power (Mark 10:17-27). The same is true when it comes to spiritual power; it is always balanced by a concern for a relationship with God and his truth (Luke 10:15-20). Any evangelistic strategy that promotes a power encounter without giving sufficient consideration to truth and allegiance encounters is not biblically balanced. Not everyone who saw or even experienced power events in Jesus's ministry turned to him in faith (Luke 17:11-19). Therefore, there must be balance and interdependence between the three dimensions.

Truth, allegiance, and power encounters appear both implicitly and explicitly throughout Jesus' ministry. In his ministry, power demonstrations were a means to an end (discipleship), not ends in themselves. Through his teaching and power demonstrations, Jesus' aim was to lead people into a saving relationship with God.

Conclusion

The gospel is always received from within one's own cultural identity (Tennent 2010:186), making it very difficult to assimilate a new idea except in terms of other ideas and concepts one already has (Walls 2002:35). As such, it is very difficult to be relevant in our Christian witness if we do not know and address the issues the people we are trying to reach are wrestling with. I agree with Jonathan Campbell when he argues that "the Gospel is often held captive by cultural ideologies, traditions and structures. In order for the Gospel to spread across cultures, it must be set free from the control of any single culture [many times, the gospel must be released from Western bondage]" (Campbell 2000:167). Just as David did not let the weight and encumbrance of Saul's armor hinder him as he approached Goliath, "we must continually identify and remove those factors that inhibit the Body of Christ from moving freely . . . [and] guard against anything that might violate New Testament patterns of mission that lead to the movement of the gospel across cultures" (Campbell 2000:170).

Because truth, allegiance, and power encounters are present in God's activities in the human sphere, and because spiritual warfare is a lifelong battle in every person's life (White 1980:313), it is vital that all three dimensions be taken into consideration together, not separately. It is also important for all of these dimensions to be contextualized, that is, they need to be appropriate to the socio-cultural setting in which Christian witness takes place.

Since the Bible teaches that demonic activities will increase in the last days (1 Tim 4:1; Rev 16:13-14), Christian witness and discipleship will not be fully "biblical or relevant to most of the peoples of the world without a solid approach to spiritual power" (Kraft 2005c:362). Because most of the peoples of the world are power oriented, it is essential that the power encounter dimension "be part and parcel of fulfilling the Great Commission" (Wagner 1988:45). Jesus commands his disciples to make other disciples by teaching them to obey everything he commanded (Matt 28:19, 20). What he commanded includes both what he said and what he did. Nevertheless, the power encounter dimension of the gospel must never be presented or used at the expense of a proper emphasis on the truth and allegiance dimensions. Nor should an emphasis on truth and allegiance dimensions be made while neglecting power encounters.

There is no shortcut in wholistic Christian witness and discipleship. In order to be effective, we cannot take the luxury of deviating from Jesus' ministry example, for it is

Christ's method alone [that] will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He

showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs [he did not discriminate the needs to minister to], and won their confidence. Then He bade them, "Follow Me." (White 1909:143)

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