

## WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD USE THEIR HEADS

Scriptures: Proverbs 1:1-7, 8:22-36

About three months ago when I had a Sunday off, my wife and I attended church at Life Center. Life Center is the mega-church on Government Way that has about 5000 people attending each week. I thought I should go see what they have that we don't. The first thing I noticed was an espresso bar in the lobby. People got their lattes before church and took them into the sanctuary. It reminded me of a story I heard about a visitor to a Presbyterian church. He said that the pews were comfortable, but the cup holders were too small.

Of course the worship service at Life Center was led by a praise band, which we sometimes have here, though I noticed that when they tried to sing a traditional hymn it did not seem quite as powerful without an organ. However, the biggest difference I noticed was in the sermon. Instead of a sermon series like I usually do on Thessalonians, Revelation, or some other book of the Bible, the pastor was doing a sermon series called "Communication for Dummies." The front of the sanctuary was decorated like the yellow cover of one of those books "For Dummies." There was no scripture reading before the sermon. Instead the pastor talked about barriers to effective communication, and he based much of the sermon on the writings of John Gottman, a well-known researcher on marriage dynamics from the University of Washington, who happens to be Jewish. The pastor quoted from the Bible, but the sermon wasn't really about a Bible passage, it was about how to communicate, especially between husbands and wives, and the Bible was used to illustrate certain points, the way I sometimes use movies or novels.

At first I was indignant. This is supposed to be a Bible believing church, and they don't even preach from the Bible! Is this a church or a therapy group? I was starting to feel a little self-righteous. But then I got to thinking. There are 5000 people here, and most of them believe in Jesus. I could tell by the way they sang songs about Jesus at the beginning of the service. These people believe in Jesus as much as I do. So why were they here for a sermon about communication instead of a sermon about the Bible and Jesus?

Then it hit me. These Christian men and women did not have a problem believing in Jesus, they had problems communicating with their spouse. They had problems raising their children, which I am sure was another sermon series at Life Center. They had problems managing their finances, which was probably another sermon series. My assumption has always been that if I help people understand the new life we have been given in Jesus, they will figure out the details of communication or personal finances from other sources, like books, seminars, or advice from friends. But these people were packed into Life Center because they needed help with these things from their church, their community of faith.

Then another idea hit me. Perhaps that is why the book of Proverbs is in the Bible. The book of Proverbs is different than many other books of the Bible. In other parts of the Bible God's will for our lives is revealed by special messengers or dramatic displays of God's power. God spoke to Abraham through angels, then gave him a child when he was too old to have one. God spoke to Moses from a burning bush, then parted the Red Sea so he could lead people out of slavery. God showed compassion for people through Jesus, then proved Jesus' authority by

raising him from the dead. Those are the parts of the Bible I like to preach about. What is a sermon on communication theory compared to that? But then there is the book of Proverbs. Proverbs has no dramatic revelations, no miracles, no visions of angels, no thunderous proclamation by prophets. Instead the book of Proverbs is a collection of teachings about how to live wisely in daily life. The book of Proverbs could be subtitled “Communication for Dummies” or “Money Management for Dummies” or “Human Relationships for Dummies.” And it is included in the Bible because sometimes mixed in with our theology we need a dose of practical instruction.

Now let me point out a couple of things. The insights of Proverbs do not conflict with the revelation of God in other parts of the Bible. This is especially clear in our second scripture lesson. In Proverbs 8, as in other parts of the book, wisdom is portrayed as a woman calling out to us to benefit from her insight and experience. In verses 22-23 wisdom says,

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginnings of the earth.

In other words, God built the principles of wisdom, the principles we will read about in this book, into the fabric of creation. God made the world to operate on certain principles, and if you understand and function according to those principles you have a better chance of experiencing God’s blessing.

Let me give two examples. Proverbs 6:27-29 contains this powerful warning against adultery:

Can fire be carried in the bosom without burning one’s clothes? Or can one walk on hot coals without scorching the feet? So is he who sleeps with his neighbor’s wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished.

What I find interesting here is that Proverbs does not condemn adultery simply because it violates God’s law. It does of course violate God’s law in the Ten Commandments, but according to Proverbs, that is not the only reason to avoid it. In the book of Proverbs adultery is not only immoral, it is stupid. It is dangerous and destructive, and anyone involved in it will get burned.

Several years ago during the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky affair, I remember thinking not just that what Bill Clinton did was immoral, though it was immoral. But I remember thinking, “How could someone who is so smart do something so stupid? Did he really think that a 20 year-old intern could have an affair with the President of the United States and not tell anyone?” It was not just immoral, it was incredibly dumb, and that is what the book of Proverbs points out.

One other example. Proverbs 23 has this vivid description of drunkenness (vs. 29-35):

Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who linger late over wine,

those who keep trying mixed wines. Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. At the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your mind utter perverse things. You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on the top of the mast. "They struck me," you will say, "but I was not hurt; they beat me, but I did not feel it. When shall I wake up? I will seek another drink.

After a description like that I don't need to tell you that drunkenness is sinful; it is enough that it is stupid.

As we saw in Proverbs 8, God built the principles of wisdom into the very fabric of the universe. This means that the Bible is not the only place you can learn wisdom. There are two sections of the book of Proverbs in chapters 22 and 24 that are called "words of the wise." Both of those sections borrow extensively, almost word for word, from an ancient Egyptian writing called the *Instruction of Amen-em-ope*. In these two chapters the Bible is quoting from the writings of another religion. It's like the pastor at Life Center quoting from John Gottman. Why would the Bible quote from the writings of another religion? Why would the pastor at Life Center build a sermon around the insights of a Jewish psychologist?

Well, think about it. If God built the principles of wisdom into the very fabric of creation, it only makes sense that people of any nation or religion can discover those principles by studying how the world works, and we can learn from their study.

That is why Christians, especially Presbyterians, have always supported education. The Bible itself, especially in the book of Proverbs, urges us to use our heads, to learn more about God's world, so we can learn better how to live in it.

This does not mean we can dispense with learning about God. In our first scripture lesson, Proverbs 1:7 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge," a point that is repeated throughout the book. We cannot dispense with the rest of the Bible and all that it tells us about God and Jesus, sin and forgiveness, suffering and hope, death and resurrection. We cannot substitute theology with psychology or geology or sociology. We still need to study the other books of the Bible, and I promise that after this summer I will go back to preaching from them, like I have before. But for the next three months we are going to take a step back from the heavy duty theology of the other books of the Bible and immerse ourselves in the practical wisdom of the book of Proverbs. We will do this because sometimes even Christians need a little *Communication for Dummies* or *Money Management for Dummies* or *Human Relationships for Dummies*, and those are exactly the themes we will find in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs reminds us that educating ourselves in the principles of life and relationships, is not an alternative to religious faith; it is part of it. For we serve God best when we use our heads as well as our hearts.

- Ken Onstot