

APOLOGIA

... always be ready to give a defense [Greek, *apologia*]
to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you ... 1 PETER 3:15_

James D. Smart

on



The Teacher as Time Traveller

What accounts for the strange silence of the Bible in the church? Why are our leaders & teachers functionally illiterate in the faith?

Edited by DAVID ASPINALL

"He gave teachers" series # II

In the 20th century there was no more influential Christian educator than James Smart. Born in the humble hamlet of Alton, Ontario (just south of Orangeville), educated at the University of Toronto and in Germany, Smart pastored Presbyterian congregations in London, Galt, Peterborough and Rosedale (Toronto) in his home province before rising to prominence in America, the foremost name in the design of Sunday school curricula.

While his name became synonymous with the church education of children in the 1950 and '60s, James Smart's reputation as a scholar was growing too. His specialties were the Old Testament and hermeneutics, the science of biblical interpretation. This combination of passions led Smart to a parallel life as a Bible teacher of international stature. His great contribution to Sunday school was the re-emphasis upon Scripture, the insistence that a teacher, like a preacher, must be conversant both in Bible and theology. Smart authored commentaries, an influential work on hermeneutics titled *The Interpretation of Scripture*, and *The Teaching Ministry of the Church*. Smart taught hermeneutics at Union Theological Seminary and Knox College in Toronto.

In his later years Smart wrote some searching, even scathing, criticism of the state of Bible teaching in the churches of North America. Having pastored and taught pastors in both Canada and the US, he was uniquely equipped to generalize about his favourite subject. In *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church* (1970), Smart addressed the problem of Bible illiteracy among Christians.

Why are our Sunday Schools so ineffective at making Christianity *real* to young Christians? Why are our church 'boards' so unable even to stave off spiritual and numerical decline? Why are our pastors often prevented from bringing *authentic* Christianity to both their flocks and the surrounding community?

Why are our Sunday Schools so ineffective?

First, Smart identifies the reason why the 'solid food which belongs to the mature' (Heb 5:14) so seldom reaches the lay teachers within our churches:

There is an immense literature now at the disposal of the nonspecialist for the understanding and interpretation of Scripture. And yet the embarrassment of every educational program in churches

large and small is the difficulty in finding persons who understand the Scriptures sufficiently to be able to interpret them intelligently to anyone else. Neither their years in church school nor their years of listening to sermons have taken them far enough into the Scriptures for them to find their way about by themselves or for their daily life to be guided and sustained by what they hear. [Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*, p 18]

The main way the Bible becomes *real* for the Christian is by its being taught within a solid framework of history. This historical anchoring of the Christian faith is not only NOT being accomplished, According to Smart, it is not even being attempted:

Until very recently it was not considered important in the church's educational programs to spend time on the nearly 19 centuries of history that separate Bible times from the present time. Attention was focused almost exclusively on the Bible and on problems of Christian conduct, and, in the haste to make the Biblical text relevant to modern life, a minimum of attention was given even to the history of Old and New Testament times. [Smart, *ibid*, p 124]

And what is the cost of the resulting unreality of the Bible world?

We have to be able to enter imaginatively into the events of Jesus' ministry and the struggles of the early church in which our own church and own life as Christians was coming into being. It has to become *our* story, more essential to our existence than the immediate events of our family life.

And what is the staggering cost to our children of the Bible's *unreality*?

The neglect of Biblical and post-Biblical history, however, destroys the continuity and allows the stage on which the Biblical drama is acted to take on an atmosphere of unreality. This is encouraged from an early age in the minds of children by the fact that they hear Bible stories and fairy stories and the two intermingle. What difference can they see between the magic wand that turns a frog into a prince and the rod of Aaron that turns itself into a snake at his command? Moses raises his hand and the waters of the sea divide. Jesus or Peter have only to speak a word and lame men are no longer lame. The Bible world like the fairy world is full of good and evil spirits. The similarity makes the Bible world all the more delightful to the child, but the child is soon aware that the fairy world is a never-never world and not the world in which he lives ... [Smart, *ibid*, p 124]

Smart also analyzes how our churches educate our youth in a way which effectively destroys the unity and continuity of the Bible itself:

... the fragmentation of the Bible in the teaching of it is frequently such that no conception is conveyed of an ongoing purpose of God in history that binds all the parts of Scripture together and reaches out beyond them to give meaning to the human story. ... The Bible with its events and personages is left hanging in mid-air in a strange and distant past ... [Smart, *ibid*, p 125]

Why are our 'boards' and 'elders' so ineffective?

Our churches need effective leadership. But far too often the leaders on our Boards, even the 'elders' of our churches, are skilled as business leaders, but woefully under-skilled as Christian educators. Smart notes the lack of stress on adult education and the knowledge of Scripture:

... even where such a class is made available, not more than 5% of the members of the church are likely to make use of it. 95% feel no need of it. Their version of the Christian faith and the Christian life is of a character that they can dispense with any serious delving into the Scriptures. They are content with a church in which all things are done decently and in order, which makes minimal demands upon their time and provides a maximum of moral stability and spiritual security ... [Smart, *ibid*, pp 168-169]

But how can a church move forward fruitfully, or even survive, if it is effectively run by the uneducated 95%?

It is significant that most of the office-bearers who provide the leadership and determine the policy of the congregation are usually among the 95%. It does not occur to them to ask what likelihood there is of them preserving a true perspective concerning the gospel and the church if they are indifferent to their continuity with the church of the Scriptures. They are too confident of their ability to remain faithful to Jesus Christ while ignorant of the Scriptures that witness to him. [Smart, *ibid*, p 169]

Why are our pastors unable to change the situation?

Keep in mind Smart is writing in the 1960s. Has the situation improved over the past 2 generations?

Surely the situation is not hopeless. Indeed Smart sees hope – where a pastor and healthy, educated minority in a church keep their flame burning brightly. Pity the poor pastor who has no one in his congregation to help him thrive in an environment where no one but he is thinking theologically:

If he is to survive theologically, he usually has to do it on his own without companionship except from his books. It is not surprising that for many pastors the theological interest fails to survive, with serious consequences for the character of their ministry ... The years of training are thrown away unless the community of theological discourse known in the seminary leads into a community of theological discourse and fellowship in the church. [Smart, *ibid*, p 168]

Smart goes on to hold out the hope that this environment can be created even with a small group of serious leaders:

Ministers who are too busy to find time for such a study group have forgotten that the foundations of the church were laid not in large preaching situations but in a group of 12. And they might find in such a group a profound enrichment of their own relationship with Scripture and the inspiration for many sermons.

Why is the Bible not REAL for Christians?

The teacher as time-traveller

For James Smart the best efforts of pastor and passionate minority can still be virtually nullified by a congregation without passion for education:

Attempts at revolution in the church school are defeated consistently by the fact that it exists in the context of an adult congregation that considers an intimate knowledge of the Scriptures unessential in what it takes to be the Christian life. [Smart, *ibid*, p 170]

Yet to the extent that the pastor and the passionate laity make the Bible *real* in their own world, they can hope to communicate that passion, that *alternate reality*, to their fellow congregants, for whom the world – not the Word – is the only reality.

How can that OTHER world – *ultimate reality* – become real, even more real than the world in which all of us are forced to live?

The interpreter of Scripture has to live in two worlds. He has to be

immersed in the world of the Scriptures with such intensity that at the heart of his being his most intimate companions are prophets, psalmists, apostles, and evangelists with Jesus Christ at their center. He lives with them. They are his first family, taking precedence over father, mother, wife, and children. ... Living in these two worlds at one and the same time, he becomes aware that they are not two worlds but one and the same world. The two worlds come together so that the Scriptures are like a magic glass through which we look to see ourselves, our fellow men, and our world as they really are. [Smart, *ibid*, p 163]

Only by such time-travelling, via the 'magic glass' of Scripture, can we hope to become 'prisoners of the Word', and escape being prisoners of the world. Such is the message of James Smart to all of us.

BIOGRAPHY of James D. Smart

James D. Smart (1906-1982). Pastor, lecturer in homilectics and Christian education at Knox College, Univ. of Toronto, Jesup Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Union Theological Seminary, New York. Smart served as editor in chief of curriculum for the Board of Christian Education, Presbyterian Church U.S.A. Died at his home in Toronto in 1982.

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