Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.4 No.4 December, 2020; p.g. 287 – 296; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

THE *SHEMA* AS A THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Popular trends and popular culture continue to foster postmodern thought. As a result, education has been impacted by postmodern concepts by an opening of thinking about the ways of knowing which include the deconstruction of the notion of truth and the negotiation of meaning. As postmodernism opens the way for acceptance of multiple perspectives, Christian educators are challenged to examine their own systems of thought and to know how best to deliver instruction in a Christian context. A Theology for Christian education assumes that the doctrines of Christian theology should drive the content, purpose, and methods of the educational programme of the church. Therefore, based on an exploratory analysis of the Shema text in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, this paper examines the theological distinctives that the Shema embeds, to spotlight and articulate fresh ideas, perspectives and suggestions for the theory and practice of Christian education in a postmodern milieu. Drawing insights from the Shema, the study calls upon Christian educators to reappraise their thought and practice and realign their curriculum to current realities, in relation to the foundational issues of Christian education to assure the transmission of a living faith to a rising generation.

Keywords: Shema, Postmodern Context, Theological Foundation, Christian Education, Living Faith.

Introduction

Creeds have always been fundamentally part of the Christian tradition. The Christian worldview has always been embedded in a 'confessional' culture. The apostolic Christian communities developed the habit of verbalising and rehashing the principles of their faith in form of recited creeds. Thus, there are creeds like the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the likes. Similarly, the *Shema* was and is the central creed of the Hebrew faith. It is a confessional statement that articulates the Jewish faith. Christian education is many ways an extension of Hebrew education. Christian education in its truest form is about transmitting the Christian faith from one generation to the next, from the cradle to the grave.

This paper seeks to draw insights from the *Shema* that espouse a theological underpinning for doing Christian education in present times. The study identifies the distinctives of the *Shema* creed analogous and contemporaneous to the principles that should propel present-day theory and praxis of Christian education. The idea is to amplify, reinforce and deepen existing insights about (not just the cognitive) but also the affective and conative aspects of this study.

Concept of Christian Education

Christian education has been diversely defined over the past half century. Miller (1963) defines Christian education as the "effort to make available for our generation-children, young people, and adults—the accumulated treasures of Christian life and thought, in such a way that God in Christ may carry on his redemptive work in each human soul and in the common life of man" (pp. 53-54).According to McKean (1988), education implies a learning process is taking place. Learning leads to growth and liberation as learners takes ownership of what they are learning, develop co-explore relationships with each other, and develop problem solving skills in their daily life. Therefore, Christian education means a learning process towards growth and liberation done in the character of Christ.

For Pazmiño (2008), Christian education is the deliberate, systematic, and sustained divine and human efforts to share or appropriate the knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, sensibilities, and behaviours that comprise or are consistent with the Christian faith. It fosters the change, renewal, and reformation of persons, groups, and structures by the power of the Holy Spirit to conform to the revealed will of God as expressed in the Scriptures and preeminently in the person of Jesus Christ, as well as any outcomes of that effort. Pazmimo's definition emphasizes the intentionality of a cooperative activity between persons and God. This activity includes the efforts to share the context of the Christians faith through the power of the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ as a goal (Pazmino, p. 87). The aspect of intentionality and Christ as a goal in Christian education is reflected in Ayandokun's description of Christian education as the disciple-making ministry of the church (Ayandokun, 2015, p.19). It is presented here as a nurturing activity or service undertaken by the church with the goal of raising (making) followers of Christ. Followers of Christ would mean those whose lifestyle have been cultured, changed and channeled after the life of Christ.

Lamport (1988) observes that the primary difference between secular education and Christian education is the adjectival descriptor Christian. "To be Christian, Christian education must have God's esteem for the human being, sense the task to be a whole-life experience of growth and maturity, and give opportunity for service through experiential action" (Lamport, p. 39).

Christian Education and Theology

What seems obvious from the above definitions and from numerous other contributions by evangelical educators is the absolute link between Christian education and theology (Anthony, 2001; Pazmino, 2008; Yount, 2008). In this respect one would refer to Christian education rather than religious education. The difference comes in articulating an education distinctly based upon theological propositions derived from the text of Scripture rather than education developed to perpetuate and propagate the tenets of a designated religious system. A Theology for Christian education assumes that the doctrines of Christian faith should drive the content, purpose, and methods of the educational programme of the church. Christian education is distinct from other kinds of education in that its aim is the transformation of the whole person into the likeness of Christ (Col. 1:28). Christian education is the process of accomplishing this aim.

Wilhoit (1986), describes the link between Christian education and theology this way:

> Theology is crucial to Christian education. Often Christian education has been accused of drifting far from orthodox theological teaching, particularly in

> regard to the Christian view of human nature and spiritual growth. This drifting is unfortunate, for Christian education is lost unless grounded in biblically based teaching. No matter how much zeal a Christian educator may have, it is of little use without an awareness of the essential theological underpinning of the faith (pp. 59-60)

In establishing a theological approach to education, one may want to consider certain distinctive theological elements that underpin Christian education:

1. God as the prime initiator and author of Christian education.
2. The Bible as the sole authority and primary source of the content of faith.
3. Christ as the unifying theme of and ultimate subject of Christian education
4. The Holy Spirit as the activator and facilitator of the principles, process and practice (impact) of faith.
5. Man as an image bearer, a collaborator and beneficiary of Christian education.

Similarly, the *Shema* was a framework for early Hebrew education and served as a background for the rise of Christian education (Schoeman, 1997).

The *Shema* Creed

The term *Shema* comes from Moses' words in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. The word *Shema* ("hear") is the first Hebrew word in the text. This text in the Old Testament is regarded as the classic confession of Hebrew faith (Bromiley et al. 1998, pp. 469-70). It is a declaration of faith, a pledge of allegiance to One God. Within the *Shema* is found both a fundamental doctrinal truth and a resultant obligation, demanding the hearer responds with his total being to the fact and demands of this essential revelation. It is more or less a framework for Israel's faith formation.

***Shema* in Scriptures**

The Deuteronomy 6 section appears in the New International Version as follows:

> 4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

The *Shema* developed to include two other passages from the Law of Moses, apart from Deuteronomy 6:4-9, which proclaim God's oneness (v. 4) and call to Israel to love Him and obey His commandments (vv. 5-9). Deuteronomy 11:13-21 record the rewards for obeying these commandments and the retributions for disobeying them. Numbers 15:37-41 lay down the law concerning tassels on garments as a reminder to keep "all the commandments of the Lord" (v. 39) (Bromiley. p. 470).

In the New Testament, the synoptic Gospels recount Jesus' use of the *Shema* (Matt. 22:37-38; Mark 12:29-30; Luke 10:27). In Mark's account, Jesus responded to a scribe's question: "Of all

the commandments, which is the most important?" (Mark 12:28, NIV) Jesus replied by citing Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Jesus' response affirmed two aspects of faith in God: (1) The *Shema* is the heart of the Deuteronomic covenant between God and His people, and (2) the *Shema* is a holistic encapsulation of God's Law to His people (Kimmitt, 2012, p. 68).

The *Shema* was the central conviction of Paul's theology and by extension, New Testament theology (Rom 3:30; 1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 4:6; 1Tim 2:15). He often refers to God's oneness at critical points in his arguments. It functions theologically and polemically. Paul supposed that appeal to the *Shema*, will carry authority with his Christ-believing audiences (Lizorkin-Eyzenberg, 2016).

In the post-biblical period (beginning from A.D. 70-95) and continuing to present day, the *Shema* became the central element of Judaism. Jews were required to recite the *Shema* as part of the morning and evening prayers (Kimmitt, p. 67).

Distinctives of the *Shema*

1. **The creed is not merely informative, but instructive**. The *Shema* did not just serve an informational value or for the purpose of memorization, but an imperative demanding responsibility and compliance. The singular imperative word, *Shema* ("hear"), carries the idea of hearing or listening, but with the implicit intent that the hearer obeys what he hears. An Israelite who hears but does not obey God's command has not heard at all. Knowledge was equated with action. Learning is equated with obedience. The call to hear is a call to obey.

2. **The creed is God-centred**. It has an authentic theological foundation. *Shema* espoused the revelation and reality of God. The theology of the *Shema* declares the:
    a. Personality of God: "The Lord Our God" *YHWH* or *Adonai* connotes God's reign over His people with a sense of interaction and intervention in their affairs. He is a God who is there and want to be identified and to identify with His people. *Elohêinû* in contrast to *Elohim* the generic form (the plural first-person possessive should be underscored) is an imbedded indication of a personal God. Both designations indicatea relational God who is present in the existence of His people, personal (intimate) to their experience, and permeates their whole essence.
    b. Unity of God: "God is one." The *Shema* is in Jewish thought the supreme affirmation of the unity of God (Huat Tan, 2008, p. 181). God is indivisible. The compound singular word for 'one' (*echad*)—a compound unity, is an implicit reference to the Godhead. The idea of the Trinity was not yet expounded as at this time but it was implied as a concept of the oneness (unity in diversity) of God.
    c. Exclusivity of God: "The Lord is one." Unlike Israel's neighbours who worshipped a plethora of gods, this clause encapsulates the monotheistic essence of Judaism. According to Adeogun (2017), this confession of monotheism does not preclude the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. "God" is plural, possibly implying the Trinity, and one may suggest a unity of the Persons in the Godhead (p. 93).The exclusivity of God also implies lordship. Yahweh is the sovereign Lord. As Frame puts it, lordship is a covenantal

concept (Frame, 1989, p. 375).God as covenant Lord selects a certain people from among all the nations of the earth to be His own. The Creator-creature relation is a covenant relation, a Lord-servant relation. When the Lord singled out Israel as His special people to be Lord over them in a peculiar way, He was not giving them an absolutely unique status; rather, He was calling them essentially into the status that all men occupy yet fail to acknowledge. God used Israel in a unique way to bring redemption (Christ) to the world. Thus God is Lord of all that in all His relations with the world He alone is to be worshipped and served (Frame, 375).

d. Sovereignty of God: God is revealed as the Almighty, all powerful God, supreme over all things. All things are under God's rule and control, and that nothing happens without His direction or permission. He judges and rewards disobedience and obedience respectively (Deut. 11:13-21).
e. Salvation of God: The *Shema* reminds Israel of God's redemptive act in delivering them from slavery in Egypt (Num. 15:4). The Exodus was an ante type of God's redemptive acts in history, which culminates in the redemptive work of Christ.

3. **The creed is apologetic.** The *Shema* became the rallying cry for Israelites in the face of polytheism. Biblical monotheism was clearly formulated for Israel, in the light of the polytheistic practices of neighbouring nations, and no other (contrary) theological (or philosophical) views would be acceptable. In rabbinic times the first verse of the *Shema* declaring the oneness of God was seen as a countercultural to the prevailing culture that parades a plethora of deities.

4. **The creed motivates holistic devotion, not just obligation.** The call to listen to God is followed by the injunction to love God. The revelation of God to Israel was to motivate an affective response of love synchronous to the totality of their commitment with the purest and noblest intentions of trust and obedience toward God. Israel's response to their confession of faith with absolute obedience is the measure of their love for God.

5. **Faith formation transpires in the context of a faith community.** Israel's faith community was a composite of the family (home) and the entire assembly of Israel.
    a. The faith community provides an intergenerational context for faith formation. Learning happens in the family context, as parents are learning so the children are learning. The faith commitment of parents sets the pattern for the children to follow. At the level of the entire assembly the older generation are exemplars to the younger generation. The first words of the *Shema* are not individual. They are communal, corporate, group-oriented in nature: "Hear me, all ye people of God!" (KJV) The injunction was not for an individual alone, but for the individual as a member of the corporate people of God. Within the intergenerational relationship between the one and the other, faith formation takes place.
    b. The faith community also provides a transgenerational context for faith transmission. In the Deuteronomy passage, Moses was speaking to the second generation of Israelites shortly before his death (Andor& Quaye, 2014, p. 144). Moses was addressing this new nation and reiterates the covenant, but does so

in a greatly expanded form and in terms appropriate to a new generation. The older generation are saddled with the responsibility to teach God's word to the next generation. What they teach flows out of their own faith commitment, as they must first commit themselves wholeheartedly to the commands (Deut. 6:6), and then they can begin to impress them on their children (v.7).

6. **The transmission of faith is to be dynamic and effective.**
    a. Firstteaching-learning is to be done diligently. This suggest that the communication of truth must be strategic, deliberate; with intentionality; targeted at a transformative outcome and consistent, with intensity and tenacity. The one who loves Yahweh wholeheartedly will diligently teach the words that Yahweh has commanded.
    b. Second, transmission should be both formal and informal, in season and out of season. The imageries of "sitting, walking, lying down and rising up", indicate the all-encompassing nature of learning and faith formation. There is no limit to the transmission of the love of God.
    c. The communication of truth is also supposed to be vivid and visual enough (Num. 15:38-40; Deut. 6:8-9) for the learners to relate with and recall. These visible signs or symbols encourage (a) recollection of God's acts of deliverance and benevolence in their history (b) fostering spiritual development; (c) remembrance of God's constant presence; and (d) binding of thehead, heart and hands (a holistic approach to learning, where the cognitive, affective and conative aspects are well engaged) to keep thoughts and actions in alignment with God's desires and commands. This was also meant to reinforce the generational dynamic of faith transmission (Num. 15:40). The Jewish people effectively learned about God through visual aids. The Jewish feasts and fasts were visible tokens and teachings concerning the relationship between God and His people. As children asked questions about the meaning of the ceremonies, the parents' answers were to be informative and instructive (Deut. 6:20-25). Their philosophy was that 'you remember what you see.' In this manner they passed truth and tradition from one generation to the next. "Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children's children" (Deuteronomy 4:9, ESV).

Educational Implications of the *Shema* in a Postmodern Context

Postmodernism is said by some to be the logical development of modernism toward ever greater relativity, not only in perception of truth but also of reality itself. Given this view, postmodernism would be the logical outcome of Enlightenment thinking, the final step of recognising that meaning is created in part, at least, by one's personal perceptions. Others see postmodernism to be a countermovement to modernism. In this understanding of postmodernism, there is a radical discontinuity with modernism, since postmodernism rejects the notion of objective truth altogether. Either way, however, the result is radical relativism (Mcquilkin& Mullen, 1997, pp. 69-70).

From the forgoing, postmodernism is difficult to define, not only because it means different things to different people but also because it is a label used to identify an evolving mood. Postmodernism, as it is generally described, is an anti-philosophy, radically relativistic, holding no creed and espousing no particular methodology (McQuilkin & Mullen, p. 69).

Postmodern thought, has challenged traditional approaches to Scripture at three points, among others: (1) Unchanging, ultimate truth does not exist. (2) Language cannot accurately communicate thought to another person's mind, and with time and culture distance the attempt becomes ever more futile. (3) The inadequacy of language is not necessarily bad because meaning is constituted of a combination of what is out there (objects and events, including the words of others) and what is in here (one's own subjective sense). Though the words of others play a formative role, the controlling element is what one brings to the text. And the outcome of that mix is all the reality there is (McQuilkin & Mullen).Thus, meaning is relative, particularly relative to one's present subjective perceptions.

Postmodernism is further festered by the post-truth culture where the quest for meaning is a maze and truth has become elusive. The term post-truth, as Le Duc (2018) puts it, is a reminder that the value of facts and truth is being eroded from individual and collective human life (para. 2). Calling this era "post-truth", does not only reflect a situation in which the meaning of truth is no longer determinable, or that truth has lost its standing in the mental deliberations of humans. Rather, the post-truth climate reflects more accurately a "conundrum where people are uncertain about the legitimacy of the truth presented to them and the trustworthiness of the source of information" (Le Duc, para. 3).

The problem lies in the process of establishing the truth and the people involved in that process. People's disillusionment with truth does not mean they have no need for truths or that they dislike truths, but that due to a variety of reasons the ability to distinguish between genuine truths and phony truths has been impaired, so that anything that appeals to them emotionally gets the upper hand.

Just as the *Shema*in Jewish thought was the supreme affirmation of the unity of God, in the face of polytheist and pluralist ancient near eastern cultures, Christian education should affirm and espouse the authenticity of the Christian faith in theory and in praxis in engaging the postmodern context.

To engage the postmodern context, Christian educators must come to terms with the reality that postmodernism is the reading of present times, and like Chiroma (2017) puts it, "it is current reality that forms the matrix from which all [Christian] education occurs (p. 19). It of utmost need, therefore, for Christian education to blend and balance all the ingredients of postmodern consciousness in other that Christians can prepared to engage the postmodern world. Greater emphasis should be placed on the understanding of contemporary culture, the ability to analyze it, and the skills needed for proper ethical analysis.

The framework and praxis of Christian education should be shaped by theological foundations, informed by cultural concerns and contemporary challenges. To this end, biblical, theological, and apologetic perspectives aregermane to the development of Christian education. Christian education leaders and workers need a more reflective and interpretive

framework for the work they do with the upcoming generation. Christian educators (parents inclusive)should identify their own (personal) convictions about their knowledge of God in view of what is normative for their lifestyle.

It is imperative for church leadership to fashion a compelling strategy for Christian education ministry. An architecture that spells out both structure and culture and clearly articulates the guiding philosophy for ministry is not negotiable. Church leadership should plan, invest in resources (time, materials, money and human) for a sustainable Christian education ministry. The faith community has the responsibility to evolve an enabling environment that shapes, influences and invest in practices that ensure a fervent and enduring faith in the next generation.

The pedagogy and curriculum of Christian education must be dynamic and creative, taking on postmodern challenges. Content should engage and be responsive to pertinent issues challenging the Christian faith. Postmodern audience are more visually (than verbally) wired. Learners are ever more media-aware and sensitized. Many learn best through visual means. They easily pick-up information with their eyes. They associate the things they learn with the things they see. Visual learners prefer and utilize pictures, examples, infographics, colours, maps, drawings, scribbling, and other visual media to augment learning. They learn best by watching. Visual learners, make up a large percentage of the developing world. They transmit their beliefs, values, culture, through stories, drama, songs, and proverbs or sayings. Christian education must creatively and effectively leverage this advantage. The family and the Church should collaborate to transmit and transfer a sustainable legacy of faith to the next generation. The importance of a healthy spiritual family life for producing solid and lasting faith in young people cannot be overemphasized. Parents are not to abdicate their roles for Sunday school teachers or counsellors, rather parents and Christian education leaders should collaborate in conceiving what is expedient to the holistic development of growing Christians.

Congregations could equip parents on their parenting and faith sharing roles to the next generation through classes, workshops, retreats, and/or support groups. Congregations would do well to transform their over-emphasis on age-group learning and incorporate family-centred learning programmes or intergenerational learning programmes, which involve the whole community: singles, couples, families with children/teens, empty nest families, and older adult families.

Congregations could create their own online presence (website, social media platforms) as the centrepiece of their online faith formation. Faith formation experiences and resources can be deployed anytime and anywhere, reaching people wherever they go online. Online activities of churches and digital communication tools could be used to extend relationships and faith formation initiated in face-to-face learning settings.

Conclusion

In an environment where right and wrong were vague concepts, blurred through a loyalty to many conflicting deities, *Shema* introduced a revolutionary idea: There is only one God and He is ethical. It was a radical declaration of the rule (kingdom) of God—that God is the only true reality, that His will is the only moral possibility, that there is no science, philosophy or logic beside Him, and most importantly, there is no being whose sense of right and wrong can

supersede His. In present day relativistic world, Christian education must keep making such radical, ethical and relevant statement that will impact secular worldview with the Christian worldview, that will rip through the postmodern mindset like a double-edged sword, until the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He reigns for ever and ever (Rev 11:15).

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