THE CASE FOR A "CASE-STUDY" APPROACH TO THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN AFRICA

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This paper surveys a potentially helpful method of theological education called the "case-study" approach. The overview briefly describes this technique, notes some analogous indigenous African and biblical forms, presents its definite advantages as an inductive teaching tool, and points out a number of limitations in its practice. The conclusion is that while the case-study method has a lot to offer theological educators in Africa, it should not be employed on its own, but rather as part of a larger, integrated programme of instruction, whether formal or informal.

INTRODUCTION

"I know a procedure that will surely help you to become a more effective teacher and the students whom you instruct to become more efficient learners." Now that is a rather bold claim to make, and one which no doubt requires a certain amount of practical evidence in order to convince you that it is true. This is the aim of the present study. But hopefully the opening statement has at least aroused your interest or curiosity to the point that you are willing to read on and consider the "case" that is made for adopting, to a greater or lesser degree, a particular method that has proven itself as an effective teaching approach in many different parts of the world, in both formal (institutional) as well as informal

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(TEE) settings. I am confident that this introductory consideration of "case-study" methodology, if you are not familiar with it already, will reveal the potential that it has to accomplish just exactly what has been promised, namely, to improve your own teaching capabilities as well as the learning capacities of your students, on whatever level this may be within the wider context of theological education in Africa.

First, a little background information may be necessary to help create a framework within which we might profitably consider this subject. I will therefore begin with a summary of the main principles and procedures of this interactive method of instruction, popularly referred to as the "case-study" approach. This particular system or technique of teaching and learning started to be formally applied to the field of Christian theological education in the 1970s, but much earlier in the century it was already being extensively employed in other secular academic disciplines, such as law, business management, medicine, and various physical sciences. It is important to recognize, however, that the process concerned is based essentially upon "induction," a didactic method which goes back much further in the history of man's intellectual development, probably to the beginning of time. It is also a mode of instruction which has special relevance to Africa, whose many peoples have incorporated the case-study approach with a high degree of artistic creativity as part of their ancient and diverse traditions of oral literature, which are still widely practiced in most areas of the sub-continent even today.

Although it promises to add a valuable new component to the overall process of theological training, the case-study technique, as commonly presented, does entail several potentially serious limitations which must be clearly recognised and thoroughly evaluated. These problems are of such a nature that they would automatically preclude the use of case instruction as the sole method of such religious education and might possibly cause a certain degree of misunderstanding that could prevent its being utilized more widely as a pedagogical tool. The approach needs to be carefully examined, therefore, with respect to both its presuppositions and its objectives in addition to the basic methodology whereby it is practiced. A critical appraisal of this kind may be best effected by actually working through a sample illustration of its mode of operation. But due to the lack of space, it has not been possible to include such an example here.[1]

WHAT IS A "CASE STUDY" AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

In short, a religious case-study is a true story (or one that is based on or adapted from a true account) which presents a human problem that does not have an obvious conclusion or a definite answer. It is a "slice-of-life" portrayal

that focuses upon a specific issue with respect to which one or more of the participants in the case are required to make a significant choice or decision. This is one which makes a difference in their lives in that it affects their basic beliefs and/or behaviour as determined by their fundamental world-view. Where Christian characters are concerned, it is important to observe and evaluate the extent to which this crucial response is guided by biblical principles and values as they are held and practiced by the person(s) involved.

The typical case-study, however, does not actually reveal the decision that was taken or the solution discovered. Rather, the account serves to concisely introduce the central problem; it dramatizes the surrounding circumstances through the words, actions, and feelings of the participants as recorded from the perspective of a "central character" or an impersonal "narrator"; and finally it brings the situation up to a point where a decision has to be made. Normally several valid alternatives present themselves at this juncture, but none of these appear to be completely "correct" or satisfactory. In other words, each option has some good and bad points connected with it, and so there is considerable room for debate over which would, in fact, be the most appropriate choice in keeping with Scriptural principles. Thus a case-study is somewhat like a mystery or a detective story minus the ending: We have a situation of tense human conflict, whether that be individual or communal in orientation, physical or psychological in focus, and pertaining to the past, present, or future. The events associated with this set of circumstances lead up to a critical decision that must be reached, based upon the various pieces of evidence and "clues" which have been given, as perceived by the central participant or narrator. What remains then is the judgment itself or the choice of what to do and the reasons for it.

And here is where the listeners set aside their passive role as observers and actually begin to "enter" the case themselves, at least mentally. It is up to them now to personally face up to the dilemma which the characters in the story confront. Either each person individually or the group as a whole in dialogue must make that critical decision, one that may significantly change or alter the course of the case-character's thinking and/or behavior. This will involve a careful consideration of all the factual details of the situation, the motivations and attitudes of the participants, the available options and their respective consequences, plus any other biblically-related factors which may enter into the decision-making process. Then, having chosen a particular alternative or course of action, each outside "interactant" should be prepared to defend it by means of a clear presentation of the evidence which supports his (her) opinion and/or which detracts from the other possibilities. This would include an indication of the expected results of the solution which s/he has proposed and why this seems to be the best thing that can be done under the current circumstances.

A "classic" instance of a case-study goes like this:

There were two men who lived in the same town;
one was rich
and the other poor.
The rich man had many cattle and sheep,
while the poor man had only one lamb,
which he had bought.
He took care of it,
and it grew up in his home with his children.
He would feed it some of his own food,
let it drink from his cup, and hold it in his lap.
The lamb was like a daughter to him.

One day a visitor arrived at the rich man's home.
The rich man didn't want to kill one of his own animals to fix a meal for him;
instead, he took the poor man's lamb
and prepared a meal for his guest.
(2 Sam.12:1-4, NIV)

We are all quite familiar with King David's indignant response. He was completely caught up emotionally with the events of Nathan's parable (case-study) and reacted as naturally if he were right there on the scene. There was no way then that he could later extricate himself from his own word of condemnation when the prophet brought him face to face with reality in the shocking revelation: "You are that man!"

Now it is true, Nathan's story is not exactly the same as the case-study as it was earlier described. For one thing, though it is based on a real-life event, the case is initially disguised by being cast in the form of a parable. Furthermore, the decision to be made in this situation was the responsibility of an implicit participant in the account, namely, the king of Israel, to whom such a seeming act of injustice would presumably have been taken for judgment. But since Nathan was actually addressing the king, this variation is understandable. And finally, it is not evident from the original setting as narrated whether a certain ambiguity was in fact present in the case, a mitigating circumstance which would have rendered it not quite so clear-cut. For example, some commentators have suggested that technically the rich overlord did have a legal right to the property of one of his tenant farmers (if the poor man were such), especially if the latter were in debt to him.

Nevertheless, certain prominent aspects of the case-method in operation are clearly present. The total psychological involvement and self-identification of the hearer is obvious. The purpose of the story to elicit a definite commitment in the form of an explicit personal reaction is also well illustrated. And certainly the decision that was so forcefully arrived at was of considerable significance to all of the participants concerned, both the characters within the parable as well as those who were listening to it. David's self-judgement fell not only upon himself, but it initiated some serious consequences for his entire family, including his future descendants, as well as the whole nation of Israel (2 Sam. 12:10-12).

CASE-STUDIES, LOGICAL INDUCTION, AND AFRICAN ORAL TRADITION

The relationship between the case-study approach to learning and the so-called "inductive" method of reasoning is not difficult to discern. The former is simply a sub-type of the latter. Induction typically proceeds from the analysis of a set of specific facts which are life-related and culture-specific to a general conclusion that is based on those facts and which, in turn, may be applied to a large number of similar situations. It works from the known to the unknown, from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from individual instances to an inclusive category, from a problem to its solution. The inductive process focuses upon concrete personal examples, analogies, anecdotes, contrasts, images, figures, details--evidence which tends to appeal to one's feelings and senses, his imagination and personal experience. The objective is to develop on this familiar foundation either a natural conclusion (based on the indigenous "logic" of the society concerned), a generalised principle of thought or behaviour, or a directive for action (e.g., exhortation, admonition, warning, prohibition, etc.). For this reason, particularly in literary contexts, learning-teaching by induction is often set within a narrative framework, one which manifests a great deal of participant interaction in the form of dialogue, as diverse positions and possibilities are progressively explored and evaluated.

The inductive method is thus strongly receptor- and experience-oriented, and this is one of the primary reasons for both its appeal and its effectiveness as a learning device. It begins where people are at – their understanding, assumptions, point of view, needs, wants, values, goals, opinions, fears, deficiencies, abilities – and works up from there in order to promote a deeper level of understanding with regard to some significant human problem or crisis, hence embodying a greater potential for personal improvement. The typically dialogic procedure strongly encourages audience interaction (verbal, at times even physical) and involvement (emotive and volitional as well as cognitive) along the way. This takes place as the diverse facts being considered are sorted

out, categorised, and organised so as to derive an agreeable and satisfying conclusion or consensus at the end. The latter may then be applied in a practical way toward solving one of life's mysteries, difficulties, or deficiencies--particularly as this concerns one's deeply-held religious beliefs and practices. Such problem-solving activity has, to a certain significant degree, to be carried out by each participant by him/herself or the impact of the exercise is diminished and its benefits correspondingly reduced. In an African context (as opposed to a Western one), however, it may be more natural for the individual to effectively learn by active participation within a group dialogue setting.

Certainly learning by induction is no stranger to Africa or to many other predominantly oral-aural societies in the world. Despite the rapid progress being made in technological development, economic diversification, political pluralism, and literacy-based education, an ancient system of communication known as "oral tradition" still plays a prominent role in popular African social culture, in both urban and rural settings. This traditional mode of message transmission – or dramatisation – generally encompasses a broad range of predominantly artistic-didactic genres, such as, proverbs, riddles, myths, legends, historical records, folk tales, praise poems, songs of all sorts as well as those verbal forms that are primarily utilitarian in function, for example, prayers, formulae of divination, magical incantations, curses, initiation instructions, and official pronouncements at social and religious ceremonies.[ii]

Although each of these popular forms of verbal discourse are quite distinct, they all tend to have several noteworthy inductive features in common. One is that they are firmly rooted in human experience (including a people's ethnic history, or "tradition") as well as the ecological and environmental features that characterise the physical surroundings of the society concerned. The content of such literature is thus quite familiar to the masses to begin with. It is easier then for them to identify with the participants and situations that are presented and hence also to meaningfully relate to the specific problem or need that is being addressed.

Secondly, these literary types are highly participatory in presentation. In other words, the audience either has a formal role to play in their performance (e.g., a riddle, responsive narrative, or song chorus), or they are encouraged to make an informal spontaneous verbal contribution to the proceedings (e.g., at an initiation ceremony or a judicial debate). This helps to ensure that most, if not all, listeners become themselves personally involved both physically and mentally with the composition of the message, whether old or new, which consequently makes a greater and more lasting impression upon them.

And finally, the forms of oral tradition are clearly functional in nature, that is, they are motivated by and intended to accomplish certain communicative objectives in the particular socio-cultural setting in which they are performed. Among such functions, the didactic element is perhaps the most important since it appears to be manifested to a greater or lesser degree on just about every occasion. Participants either learn for the first time (if they are younger) or they reinforce in their own thinking and habits some of the chief moral and ethical tenets of their society through the means of their oral lore. Yet by virtue of the equally prominent aesthetic and social dimension of such literature, this instructional component is subdued, downplayed, and frequently even completely disguised. Participants, whether young or old, are enculturated into the key beliefs, mores, customs, and behavioural standards, of the group even as they are fully engaged in an enjoyable communal endeavour. Education is not perceived, therefore, as being an activity that is somehow esoteric, restrictive, oppressive, unproductive, tiring, or just plain boring – not if one can have fun while one is doing it!

Most African oral traditions do, in fact, boast of a particular literary genre which is similar in many respects to the case-study as outlined above. This is the so-called "dilemma tale," which deals with a specific problem in life, especially with regard to interpersonal relationships, for which there is no apparent or easy solution. After the tale has been told, it is up to the audience to debate it, seeking a way out of the difficulty that will not only uphold the traditional value system and way of life, but will also work out the best for all those concerned, not necessarily as individuals, but as members of a tightly-knit social community. The following is an example selected from the Ila corpus as recorded earlier this century by Smith and Dale:[iii]

A man and his wife went to visit their friends. On their return homewards they were accompanied by their respective mothers. On the road, the four were set upon by all manner of horrible creatures – lions, snakes, leopards, etc. etc. They managed to elude them and got to a river. There they found a canoe, but to their horror it would only hold three people. Their enemies were pressing hard upon their trail. The river was full of crocodiles; they couldn't hope to swim. Only three could escape. One must die! Who was it to be?

The man sacrificed his mother-in-law, you say. No! His wife would not allow him. She would not desert her mother, nor he his: the elders would not forsake their children. How did they get out of this difficulty?

The preferred "native answer," according to Smith and Dale, is that all four persons sacrificed themselves by sitting down on the riverbank to die together. If it is true that this is the solution which would finally be agreed upon

in practice, it would probably be due to the authority of the narrative tradition backing this conventional conclusion. This outcome, however, would undoubtedly be opposed, especially nowadays, in the preceding communal debate, whether seriously or just for the sake of argument, by a variety of strongly supported and closely argued counter-proposals.

THE TEACHER AS PARTICIPANT IN CASE-STUDY TECHNIQUE

Most of us would probably agree that the case-method is, potentially at least, a valuable pedagogical tool, for it serves to more fully engage the student psychologically in his/her own learning experience, and this makes the point of the lesson both easier to retain in one's memory and more likely to be actually applied in life. A well-composed (whether orally or in writing) and publicly presented case study kindles a listener's creativity and interest, arouses latent analytical skills, promotes a deep level of theological thinking and spiritual awareness, leads a person to the Scriptures for possible analogies and answers, encourages a co-operative or participatory approach to problem-solving in the church, and fosters a critical searching and evaluation of one's own religious assumptions for any hidden self-centredness or ethnocentric bias. But what about the teacher – where and how does s/he fit into this essential educational process?

The proponents of the case-study approach are quite definite on this point: The instructor has an indispensable role to play in the whole learning event. Furthermore, the method serves to help one develop and improve one's teaching skills. This is because the teacher him/herself becomes engaged in the process of learning, not only with respect to the case being presented, but also in relation to all those who are participating in its discussion. In short, the instructor becomes a student too--but a special sort of one--rather than acting as the privileged oracle of wisdom, a sole dispenser of knowledge, an authoritative shaper of public opinion, or the infallible judge of right and wrong. In his/her capacity as discussion leader, the "moderator" of the case (avoiding now the term "teacher") carries out a number of key functions which contribute greatly to the success (or failure) of this communal learning experience. These may be summarised in terms of three major activities, which are closely related to one another in practice:

1) Stimulate Interaction – Ideally, once a case has been presented, it should largely "run on its own" so to speak through the various reactions and suggestions by the participants.

The moderator should fade into the background, as it were, to allow the others to develop their ideas, argue their points, and state their opinions. Of

course, this does not always happen, and people may be reluctant to express their own views on the case at hand, especially at first. Therefore, it is up to the moderator to keep things moving by asking provocative questions, calling for a restatement/clarification, and by initiating other activities designed to promote the personal involvement of everyone there, e.g., set up a mini-drama, i.e., to "role-play" the characters of the case; call for a vote on a particular issue; assign the writing (or utterance) of a formal "opinion" or "response" on the case; organise a team-debate over opposing positions; carefully record and organise individual contributions or group decisions on a chalkboard; and so forth.

2) Guide the Discussion – There are times, of course, when the moderator may have to assume a more active presiding role during the deliberation of a case in order to preserve order and an atmosphere that is conducive to the free expression of one's ideas – no matter how controversial these may be, as long as they are directly related to the subject at hand. In other words, s/he may occasionally have to act as a "referee" so that a healthy difference of opinion does not degenerate into personal quarrelling or a lively conversation become monopolised by just a few outspoken individuals. Conflict and opposition, though inevitable, even necessary, in a meaningful debate, should never be allowed to becloud matters emotionally or divert the discussion off course and on to peripheral issues, which while interesting in themselves, do not really contribute to a resolution of the principal problem under consideration. While it is always important to keep the exchange of ideas on track, at times it may be necessary for the moderator to highlight certain alternatives which have not yet been taken up in order to get participants to creatively investigate some new lines of thinking. Specific "time-limits" may also have to be set (or better: mutually agreed upon) so that a variety of points and perspectives may be examined within the period available.

3) Provide Pertinent "Commentary – In a role which overlaps considerably with the two preceding ones, a moderator must be prepared to serve as a "commentator" on the debate which s/he has initiated through his/her case study. This involves breaking in to the discussion at periodic intervals, at some convenient pause-point, in order to supply a summary of the proceedings thus far or a survey of the conclusions already reached by the group. This sort of topical round-up would be especially useful, of course, at the end of the meeting. In addition, it may be necessary for the moderator to provide certain relevant background information pertaining to the case at hand, that is, concerning the people, places, events, situations, and circumstances which surround the events being considered. At times this may be of a technical nature, such as the clinical aspects of AIDS detection and treatment, the psychological characteristics of depression, or the political implications of famine-relief projects. The vital culture-specific significance of a particular traditional rite or ceremony will need

to be clarified for ethnic "outsiders." It may also be helpful to introduce references to analogous cases for comparative study and evaluation. Depending on the theological background of participants, some supplementary information relating to the teachings and case-studies found in the Scriptures may have to be provided by the moderator for the group's consideration.

TWO MODEL "CASE"-TEACHERS

An excellent model of a skilled, down-to-earth religious instructor is Jesus Christ himself. Not only did he depend upon a specific type of case-study, the parable, as his preferred mode of instruction (Mk.4:33), but he also illustrated how these literary forms might be effectively utilised, on several conceptual levels, to get one's various theological and ethical points across.[iv] The parable, as a very basic mode of didactic communication, was one well-suited for reaching the untutored masses who could so easily be mislead. These real-life accounts (though probably not historically true) explained and demonstrated in most practical, down-to-earth terms certain crucial features about the "Kingdom of God" which he had come to establish and to exemplify. There were a lot of erroneous notions circulating about the promised Messiah in those turbulent days of Roman rule, crass nationalistic ideas which were often based upon a materialistic and/or literalistic interpretation of some passage from the Mosaic law or the prophets. Our Saviour's first task then was to start (even shock) people thinking along different, more spiritual lines – to enable them to "unlearn" as it were what they had been taught by the traditional religious establishment and to focus on what the will of God really was for their lives. He usually did this by embedding within his parables some event or element that was controversial or which contradicted conventional "wisdom" and contemporary "dogma" on the particular topic at issue (e.g., how the people of God were to relate in a "neighbourly" way to ethnic outsiders).

For his "students," the disciples, Jesus could take this inductive learning process a step, and sometimes two, further in its degree of detail. Often in response to their own questions about a given parable, Christ would present an interpretation and application of the "case" which it illustrated. Many, perhaps even most, of these were based upon a straightforward analogy or comparison between an incident from ordinary life and the relationship that God wanted to establish with his people, such as the so-called "Parable of the Sower," found in Mark 4 (cf. Matt. 13 and Luke 8). Other parables, however, were more provocative and closely approximated the modern case-study in calling for a definite decision on the part of his addressee(s). A good example of this is the "Parable of the Good Samaritan" in Luke 10. Although the answer that Christ wanted was obvious enough (Luke 10:36), it was not one that was easy for a community leader, especially an "expert in the law," to verbalise, given the great

socio-religious gulf that existed between Jews and Samaritans. Nevertheless, the man was pushed to admit that the Samaritan was indeed the "neighbour" of the waylaid Jewish traveller, and he was thus confronted with the typical parable-concluding practical implication or imperative, in this case: "Go and do likewise!" (v.37).

The Apostle Paul also exemplifies a number of literary variations of the case-study technique in his letters. This is naturally much more difficult to accomplish by means of written communication, for the moderator is not able to personally interact with his respondents. Thus, the main point of the discussion or argument tends to be much more focused in the direction of one particular response. Nevertheless, the minds of the addressees are definitely caught up in a serious ethical or moral issue, which they are then forced to wrestle with and resolve in their own minds. We see this illustrated in Paul's handling of the problem of eating idol meat and giving "offence" as it concerned the Corinthian congregation.

He first outlines the central teaching on the relationship between God, idols, and fellow Christians in chapter 8 of his first letter, taking care to draw attention to the implications for "strong" believers on the matter of whether or not to eat "idol meat" in the presence of a "weaker" brother (e.g., 8:10-12). The whole of chapter 9 is then taken up with a personal case-study, as it were, based upon the Apostle's own practice of sacrificing his rights (i.e., of receiving congregational support) for the sake of others in order to serve the Gospel cause. Next, the grave spiritual (and physical!) danger of actually participating in pagan religious worship is highlighted by several graphic examples of ancient Israel in the wilderness (10:1-13) and also by contemporary Christians as they celebrate the Lord's Supper (10:14-22). Finally, Paul puts the reader/hearer himself into his own case-study as he sketches several scenarios where a decision on whether or not to exercise his Christian freedom will have to be made in line with the twofold criterion of doing everything to the glory of God and yet nothing that will cause a brother (or sister) to fall in his (her) faith (10:23-33). Notice that at the very end of his discourse on this subject (11:1), Paul points out the importance of having good, biblically-led "role-models" to follow in the oftentimes difficult matter of deciding what to do in a specific ethical situation ("case") in life.

WHAT IS NEW ABOUT CASE-STUDIES?

At this point someone might be tempted to conclude that the case-study method is nothing new at all. Good Christian educators have been following the approach for centuries, certainly in more recent times in the religious discipline that is sometimes termed "practical" (moral) theology. As was pointed out earlier,

it is quite true to say that case-studies in the generic sense of human examples, analogies, and life-histories have always been utilised for illustration as a prominent component of the inductive method of teaching/learning. The difference is that nowadays the term is being used in a much more limited sense and put into practice as part of a rather specific educative strategy.

We might summarise the main features which distinguish these modern "cases" as follows: They are – condensed or adapted from an actual historical record, but have a definite spiritual relevance for many analogous situations in the present day; they are deliberately composed in order to focus upon a particular crisis or turning point in life; they are selected in part on account of their ambiguity or lack of an immediately apparent solution (though the Scriptures will of course speak to the various issues involved); and they are intended to elicit a concrete decision on the part of receptors, one which each participant must be prepared to publicly defend on the basis of God's Word.

Furthermore, we also saw that the case-study method involves a rather specific mode or technique of instruction in order for it to be successfully effected. The teacher himself becomes a learner, for he finds himself in a situation where he does not have all the answers (or at least undebatable ones), and in some instances he may not even know where to look. In his role as a "moderator" of the proceedings, he discovers himself being continually enriched by the ideas and insights of his "panel of correspondents" or student commentators. His job is to keep the discussion focused and running along smoothly, but also honestly addressing all aspects of the chief moral questions or theological issue(s) which the case has uncovered. He may assist here and there with a summary, conclusion, or bit of background information as needed, but in the main he is there simply to "direct traffic" in what is intended to be a communal, fully participatory, mutually engaging, and spiritually beneficial learning experience.

SOME LIMITATIONS OF THE CASE-METHOD APPROACH

Doing theology by means of cases and the ensuing participant discussion, whether oral or written (i.e., "briefs"), was never intended to be an exclusive, independent approach to the discipline. Rather, it has been correctly promoted and employed as a supplementary instrument of learning – designed to engage, integrate, illustrate, and apply the four principal fields of biblical, historical, systematic, and practical theology within the context of various problematic issues and situations which confront one in a contemporary setting. For this reason, the case-technique needs to be closely, yet also deliberately, incorporated as part of a total theological formal (e.g., seminary) or informal (TEE) course of study to augment the other, more traditional methods of

teaching. Yet it should not be viewed as something quite peripheral either, as an exercise reserved for the last class period in the week or quickly (and haphazardly) introduced on a hot summer afternoon when most students are having great difficulty in staying awake!

Thus supplementary does not mean subordinate, for as a didactic exercise, the case-study method is hard to surpass in effectiveness for achieving its objectives. However, it works best (in an African setting) when utilised in conjunction with other didactic modes and means of communication as part of a larger "inductive" emphasis within the curriculum,[v] one that favours, for example: oral (or written) instruction by the dialogic, question-answer + examples method, rather than by concentrated lectures (no matter how "logically" or "systematically" these may be organised); periodic joint, as opposed to individual, homework/research assignments and class presentations; frequent sessions involving interdisciplinary "team"-teaching (for expatriates, definitely with a national co-worker); instruction (if possible) in a common vernacular language to encourage and check up on the correct transmission of key theological terms, concepts, and applications; participation in some form of Bible translation work (e.g., a review for accuracy); and frequent oral-visual evaluation (by cassette tape or video) of student performance in sermon delivery, teaching style, evangelistic witness, and various pastoral acts (e.g., visiting the sick).

The big problem is that case-teaching is not usually very efficient as far as one's use of the resource of time is concerned, which is a serious limiting factor that is rather difficult to overcome in today's crowded curricula or in the periodic visitations that characterise a TEE programme. What gets communicated by this method is generally there to stay, but it takes a considerable amount of deliberative discussion to reach that stage, i.e., to fully explore a situation to the point where students begin to personally benefit from the learning experience (not a "lesson" per se). A related shortcoming is that appropriate and factually based case-studies cannot always be found to teach, or illustrate, the full range of subjects that need to be covered in a given syllabus. In addition to scope, another difficulty is depth: cases cannot – and should not be forced to – develop a particular theological topic to the degree of detail that may be desired in a comprehensive treatment of the subject. It is clearly much more effective when used as a tool in the instruction of matters pertaining to ethical, or applied, theology.

Now the preceding are all fairly obvious limitations, though one might object to it being somewhat too pessimistic an appraisal. Be that as it may, since the case-study approach relates primarily to the method of instruction rather than to the content of what is intended to be taught, it may be more profitable to zero in on that particular aspect of the issue: how does the use of cases rate as

a pedagogical procedure in the field of theological education as a whole? Here is where we find a rather serious deficiency in delineation, one which needs to be amended in order to avoid both a misunderstanding and a misapplication of the technique.

This problem essentially concerns the matter of priorities. One normally finds in most published presentation of the case-study method some potentially misleading statements regarding its nature and objectives.[vi] These tend to imply, whether rightly or wrongly, a certain relativistic bias or perspective that seems to permeate its practical operation and application. Such a position or approach would in turn tend to cast doubt upon the primary relevance, perspicuity, sufficiency, and authority of the Holy Scriptures, and this, for most "evangelical" theologians, is in itself a serious, self-incriminating "case" as far as usage is concerned.

There is, for example, an over-emphasis on the search for real-life situations in which "no clear right or wrong answer appears," as if such ambiguity were being established as the principal characteristic, or *sine qua non*, of the "genuine" case-study. One is thus called upon to consider "clues which, evaluated by the students' criteria and values, pose various 'solutions' or alternative types of response." Such an analytical procedure of course depends upon the specific objective means whereby one seeks to come to a resolution or decision in the matter. And here we notice the conspicuous lack of any explicitly formulated set of biblical criteria that would enable one to "weigh the evidence," that is, to assign a priority rating to some factors over against others which may be equally prominent in the circumstances described. One is merely encouraged to discover "the decision which is most creative and responsible" with the caution being that this "is often not clear cut or obvious."

In short, the Scriptures do not appear to assume a position of pre-eminence in the decision-making process, either qualitatively (i.e., with respect to its divine authority) or quantitatively (i.e., as the primary source of guidance). Instead, it is demoted, whether by intention or effect, to one among several possible (and presumably equal) "resources of grace" which the investigator has the freedom to tap in order to cope with the theological and moral complexities that are inherent in a given situation. Thus it is no surprise that frequently "different recommendations" emerge because the commentator is drawing upon differing choices or judgements among "the traditional sources of theology such as the Bible, revelation [seemingly extra-biblical], tradition [i.e., ecclesiastical], or [human] reason" [my comments added]. In fact, one is warned against establishing any sort of evaluatory guidelines in the educative operation since "clear criteria and the relative degree of authority cannot be assigned in advance; rather, these become factors in theological reflection."

One could not be faulted, therefore, were s/he to come to the conclusion that we are engaging here in the liberal, relativistic practice of theology which has sometimes been popularly termed "situation ethics." In other words, the conclusion that someone reaches with regard to a particular case is very much an individual or personal matter. Thus it will usually depend more on the associated contextual circumstances and what is "best" (physically, psychologically, socially, morally, spiritually – all rated more or less equally) for the human participants involved, rather than upon any objective and predetermined standards or norms of belief and/or behaviour. And the paramount factor guiding the operation appears to be nothing more or less than the analyst's own idiosyncratic judgement in the case, for "the appropriate or best decision will be one that is consistent with your own beliefs...and values." But that would be a pretty heavy load to carry, for how do I know that I (depending solely on my own intellectual and spiritual resources) am right?! Or does one not need to be concerned about this?

In fact, the impression is sometimes given that the didactic means justifies the doctrinal end, that is, as far as the correspondents in the case are concerned. There is an (over-) emphasis upon "facilitating analytical and creative skills"; on the "self-involving and self-affirming reciprocal process" which this dialogical approach encourages; on "the integration of knowledge, discernment, and action" that the model promotes and the consequent "growth in Christian maturity" which participants experience. Now these are all valuable by-products of the process of creative interaction, but they should not be allowed to detract from the objective, biblical basis upon which all theologising – whether expository, catechetical, evangelistic, apologetic, or ethical – must be built.

WHAT THEN IS THE PLACE OF THE "CASE-METHOD " IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION?

In conclusion, the conception, exposition, and application of the case-study approach in theological education in Africa, for all its potential as an inductively practised, didactic tool, needs to be significantly modified in procedural terms through the placement of much greater – in fact, the predominant – stress upon that principal theological "resource" which precedes and should govern all other considerations, namely, the Holy Scriptures. The Word of God has the authority of our Lord himself, and this cannot be superseded by any other opinion – no matter how pathetic or pressing some contrary human situational circumstances may appear to be, no matter how rational and compelling an antithetical argument might sound.

Similarly, the sufficiency of Scripture must never be underestimated in the search for solutions to the many controversial situations that African Christians, like their counterparts around the world, confront in a basically materialistic, humanistic, and secularised age. A removal of the outer socio-culturally specific wrappings inevitably reveals that we are dealing with essentially the same corrupt core, man's inherent problem -- a sinful nature and its various manifestations in life, such as greed, pride, lust, rebellion, superstition, idolatry, and the like. Thus, the solution, too, remains the same, namely, repentance in faith and a submissive re-commitment to the whole will of God, as revealed in his Word through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In this connection then, we should not forget the fundamental clarity of God's Word either, for it still shines forth like a lamp for the feet of modern man as he treads his thorny path through life, just as it did for the ancient psalmist. Once a spiritually regenerated person gets rid of his/her own false presuppositions, prejudices, and preferences, the biblical text usually reads quite clearly with regard to what is right and wrong in the normal, everyday affairs of human existence, no matter what culture and way of life he is heir to and participant in. There are exceptions, of course, but the fundamental assumption concerning the Bible's perspicuity ought never be denied or ignored.

To be sure, the difficult, ambiguous, mentally exhausting, and soul-wrenching cases can and do occur -- those calling for firm decisions which cannot be made easily in accordance with established theological and moral principles or some explicit, or even implicit, reference in Scripture to lean on for guidance. The practical methodology described in this essay will certainly assist one in coming to grips with such problems and in narrowing the alternatives for a possible resolution with the help of insights to be derived from what may be better termed the "secondary" resources of grace -- past doctrinal and confessional formulations of the church, the shared individual and collective experience of the Christian community, and the knowledge available from science and other secular fields of human learning.

But the latter all need to be kept subservient to the primacy of the Word and a clear recognition of and reverence for its inherent efficacy and authority. For even when silent on a specific issue, the joint, interactive study of Scripture in more general terms, accompanied by a prayer for the Spirit's guidance, will often result in an opening up of the spiritual discernment necessary to solve the problem at hand. As the writer to the Hebrews has so beautifully expressed it:

> For the word of God is living and active.
> Sharper than any double-edged sword,
> it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow;

it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (4:12).

We recall that Job in his desperate time of trial and uncertainty did not receive a direct answer to his grievous complaint either--only a simple, yet powerful, exposition of the wondrous glory of his sovereign Creator. Yet that was the only answer he needed in order to recognise the error of his former approach and to adopt a new perspective on the "ways of God" in the world (42:1-6). With the Apostle's exhortation uppermost in our minds then, it behoves us to put biblically based, case-study methodology to widespread, but discerning, use in the service of the African Church of Jesus Christ:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful
for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness
so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped or every good work. (2 Tim.3:16-17)

END NOTES

[i.] A sample case study entitled "A Case of Cleansing" is available from the author for the cost of reproducing and mailing ($3.00). Send to: E.W., Lutheran Seminary, P.O. Box 310091, Lusaka, Zambia.

[ii.] My initial observations relating to the Chewa oral narrative tradition are recorded in a little UNESCO-sponsored booklet entitled, *Nthano za kwa Kawaza* ("Folktales from Kawaza-land"), Lusaka: Zambia Language Group (1976).

[iii.] Smith, E.W. and Dale, A.M. *The Ila-Speaking Peoples of Northern Rhodesia* (vol.2, New York: University Books, 1968), pp.332-333.

[iv.] For a more detailed overview of Christ's parable-telling technique in relation to several well-known texts, see E. Wendland, "Finding Some Lost Aspects of Meaning in Christ's Parables of the Lost--And Found (Luke 15)," *Trinity Journal* 17NS (1996), pp.19-65.

[v.] My observations here are based on, yet also certainly limited by, my own personal teaching/learning experience – that is, 30 years at the Lutheran Seminary in Lusaka, Zambia and 25 years as a translation consultant-adviser with the United Bible Societies in south-central Africa. For most of these years, I have often worked together (to my advantage) with a Zambian colleague, Rev. Salimo Hachibamba.

[vi.] The various citations below are taken from two foundational texts by Robert Evans, entitled *Christian Theology: A Case Study Approach* (1976) and *Introduction to Christianity: A Case Method Approach* (1980), both published by Plowshares Institute (Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA).