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**DEVELOPING A
CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW:
UNDERSTANDING SUFFERING
AND GOD’S CHARACTER**
Lal Senanayake



Dear Friends of SCHOLARLEADERS,

Growing up, I had plenty of opportunities for education. You too? I often wonder: What if I had few if any of those opportunities?

What if I had been raised in a poor village in Sri Lanka? How would I go about making sense of the world? If fortunate enough to know Jesus, how would I make sense of my faith in that world? Further, how would I make sense of my faith in a context laced with religious conflict?

I suggest reading Lal’s essay with these questions in mind. He seeks to lead the Church to think through its relationship to society in the face of suffering. And please join me in intercession for Lal, for his teaching ministry, for the pastors he educates, and for the flocks those pastors shepherd.

Grateful for our partnership in ministry,

Larry A. Smith
President



Photo credit: ScholarLeaders

Dr. Lal Senanayake

DEVELOPING A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

Lal Senanayake is the president of Lanka Bible College and Seminary in Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. *SCHOLARLEADERS* supported him during his PhD studies at Trinity International University (Chicago, USA). He graduated in 2009. As a teenager, Lal was the first in his village to come to Christ – and he was driven out with nothing but the clothes on his back. For more about Lal’s perspective on Christianity in Sri Lanka, you can read Jessi Strong’s interview with him in *Bible Study Magazine*, March/April 2016.



Buddhism dominates Sri Lanka.

On Easter Sunday, 21 April 2019, Muslim suicide bombers killed 258 people in my country, Sri Lanka. Afterward, some Christians were terrified, asking, “How do we plan future services?” Others called for retaliation. In fact, in mid-May, mobs attacked mosques.

My first prayer was that, even in fear and anger, the Church would be a community that transforms society. We cannot sacrifice truth for social harmony. Nor can we react violently. Rather, we must reflect Christ.

Yet, so far in the 21st century, the Sri Lankan Church has not lived by such a holistic mission. Christianity in Sri Lanka may date to St. Thomas the Apostle (72 A.D.), although Sri Lankans associate Christianity with colonialism (1505 – 1948). Despite this heritage and in contrast to the New Testament Church’s impact on Western civilization, Christianity in Sri Lanka has had little influence. Protestant Christians are just 2% of the population; 70% are Buddhist.

The Gospel’s impact on Sri Lanka has been weakened because Christians here lack an integrated understanding of what it means to follow Christ. They have not developed a Christian worldview.

The only foundation for such holistic mission is intellectual engagement with our faith. A systematic understanding of God’s character can help us respond to crises like the Easter bombings – as well as to everyday, personal crises – in ways that will minister to others.

CONSEQUENCES OF INARTICULATE FAITH

Sri Lankan Christians often do not study the Bible’s context or Christian history, nor do they use study aids. They take the Bible at face value, and as a result, many leaders and believers misinterpret the Bible. Such misinterpretations lead unbelievers to mock the Bible’s apparent inconsistencies and lack of academic value.

Further, the Church downplays education. Many pastors lack formal training and theological and Biblical maturity. Yet this attitude contrasts sharply with our culture – even poor Sri Lankans have university degrees because the government subsidizes university study. In this context, Christians’ anti-intellectualism opens a wide field for unbelievers’ criticism. The Church cannot answer questions and seems to appeal only to emotion.

Sri Lanka’s history adds to this situation. In the 19th century, Buddhists welcomed Christians. But as Christianity spread, Buddhists reacted with nationalistic anger – and Christians started to criticize Buddhism openly. To quell these tensions, in the 1870s, Christian and Buddhist intellectuals held a series of public debates. Buddhists won, and Sri Lankans rejected Christ.

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN FAITH?

So, to reach our culture, we must ask, “What is faith? Is it social justice? Is it blind trust? Is it a magical machine for prosperity?”

No – rather, faith involves careful understanding of Biblical truth. Hebrews 11:1 says that faith rests on “evidence of things not seen.” We need to study this evidence. The most important evidence is the Bible, where God reveals His character. God’s character guides us as we make meaning of our lives and as we share meaning with others.

We need this guidance most urgently as we face suffering. To take four examples, God’s goodness,

God’s transcendence, God’s nearness, and God’s omniscience should shape our faith and actions.

GOD’S GOODNESS & OUR GROWTH

God is good, and everything that comes from God is good for human health and development.

Therefore, when leaders make meaning through preaching, teaching, or counseling, that meaning must be good for human holistic development. Peter preaches that Christ “went about doing good and healing all” (Acts 10:38). Like Peter, we should encourage people to imitate Christ.

GOD’S TRANSCENDENCE & OUR SUFFERING

God is the ultimate, transcendent authority. He made our world to display His true character, and He gave His Word to communicate unfailing truth. We are made in God’s image, so we should consider how God’s world and Word express His truth.

In Acts, while Stephen is being stoned, he sees Christ ruling in glory. Even as he suffers, his vision of Christ’s transcendence enables him to say, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (7:60) – forgiveness that likely contributed to Paul’s conversion.

Like Stephen, even when we suffer, we can still see God’s transcendence, and we can speak words of forgiveness.

GOD’S OMNISCIENCE & OUR DISCERNMENT

We know that God is unlimited in space, time, knowledge, and power. Therefore, when God acts in His wisdom, He considers all the facts.

We, however, are limited. Therefore, we must use every resource when we are trying to understand how to speak to someone or how to act in some situation.

Later in Acts, God tells Ananias to visit a dangerous man notorious for killing Christians. Although Ananias initially questions God’s wisdom (9:13-14), he trusts God’s omniscience. When God says, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine,” Ananias obeys. He comforts Paul – he even calls this persecutor “Brother” – out of faith in God’s wisdom (9:17).

Like Ananias, before we pass judgment, we need to apply what we know about God. We cannot blindly make decisions. Rather, we must submit to God’s wisdom and humbly obey.

GOD’S NEARNESS & OUR COMFORT

Though God is transcendent, He is also near us – immanent. Christ Himself expressed God’s transcendent truth in stories about farmers, weddings, flowers, foxes, and children.

So we must acknowledge that God comes down to us. We must imitate Christ by addressing searchers’ questions carefully and by delivering rational responses to unbelievers.

In Acts, Paul does this when he preaches the Gospel differently depending on his audience. At a synagogue, Paul recaps Old Testament history before he mentions Christ (13:16-41). Speaking to pagan Athenians, on the other hand, Paul discusses God as Creator and Judge (17:22-31).

Furthermore, throughout Acts, the apostles apply God’s nearness to individuals’ situations. Because they know Christ’s power, they heal a beggar rather than give him money (3:1-10). Because they understand that God’s forgiveness is for everyone, they prevent a jailer’s suicide by staying in prison rather than escaping (16:25-34). Because they trust God’s protection, they eat dinner on a sinking ship (27:21-38).

Thus, when we speak and act, we must connect God’s Word to others’ challenges – even when we are threatened, imprisoned, or attacked.

CONCLUSION

In societies often misled by lies and violence, Christian truth will be transformative. As we apply God’s goodness, transcendence, omniscience, and closeness to how we speak and behave, we will bless believers and unbelievers alike – even in suffering.