

Anchor Holding within the Veil

When in seminary, I was taught that pastors should avoid using biblical references and terminology without first explaining them. According to studies, while Christians have greater access to the Bible, they do not know it nearly as well as those from previous generations. Therefore, when we preach, we were told, we should avoid referring to people like David and Abraham and Paul without giving a few words of summary about who they are. Most of us have a good idea who these three men were, and perhaps when I refer to them, I do not need to explain when they lived and what role they played in redemptive history. Mentioning people like Apollos, Boaz, or Haggai might evoke a different response. We might not be able to immediately place them in the Bible or explain their role in salvation history.

The same can be said of words and phrases. Sometimes we throw around words like “atonement” or “justification” or phrases like “perspicuity of Scripture” assuming that those who are listening know what they mean. Some might, but not all will. Thus, we should avoid these expressions unless we explain them, we were told as pastors in training.

It might be helpful for songwriters to receive the same instruction. I have found that there are phrases that need to be explained before they can be understood. This is true of some older songs, “here I raise my Ebenezer” in *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*, is one such phrase. Few of us know what “ebenezer” means and many of us cannot identify the passage where this word is found, leaving us uncertain about what we are singing. The problem also exists in newer songs. One example of a song which contains phrases which probably need explanation is *Cornerstone*, written and published by the Australian Hillsong, a church group that has received some harsh criticism over the past decade or so because of their adoption of the Prosperity Gospel theology (another phrase that probably needs explanation). Whenever a Hillsong song appears on the screen, I am somewhat cautious when I sing the words. I think a little more deeply about what I am singing.

In *Cornerstone*, we find the phrase “my anchor holds within the veil.” It is repeated twice at the end of the second verse. An astute Bible student will recognize that the reference comes from Hebrews 6:19,20 where we read, “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf.” The “veil” of the song is the “curtain” mentioned in the verse from Hebrews. Even having this verse quoted might leave some confused, for the book of Hebrews assumes that the reader has a deep knowledge of Old Testament teaching and practice, particularly regarding the role of the temple and its priests.

As we know, in the temple of the Old Testament, there was a thick curtain that separated the temple building into two rooms. The room behind the curtain, from which all but the High Priest were denied access, was considered an extension of God’s throne room which was located in heaven. From that room God ruled the world. To go behind the curtain was to enter into God’s throne room, and while the room in the temple was on the earth, to be in that room was to be in heaven or at least in the presence of God. The High Priest, in the Old Testament, would go into that room, and he did so as a representative of the

people. In effect, when he entered that room, the people entered with him. He provided the connection to God.

In Hebrews 6, we read about some who were abandoning faith in Jesus Christ. Most likely the author of Hebrews is referring to Jewish people who were enduring persecution because of their commitment to Jesus, and they were thinking that they should abandon the Christian faith and return to Judaism. The author of Hebrews warns them and tells them that to do so was to abandon the salvation that God had provided. He then goes on to tell them that the only way to be secure in our relationship with God is to trust in his promise to save us, and to put our trust in Jesus Christ who is our High Priest. By ascending into heaven, Jesus has gone behind the curtain, figuratively speaking, and has entered into his Father's throne room. If we put our trust in Jesus, we can have the assurance that we remain connected to God the Father and have access to his presence because our sins have been forgiven.

As I read and reread the passage from Hebrews 6, I came to realize that the author of Hebrews does the very thing that we, as pastors, were warned not to do when we prepared a sermon. The author of Hebrews uses phrases and terminology and references which are broader and deeper than first meets the eye. In fact, as I gave a few moments to studying Hebrews 6 and the reference to the anchor, I realized that I would need to do a lot more study if I am going to fully understand this reference.

I'm not sure that the writer of the song, Cornerstone, fully understood the depth of the biblical reference to Hebrews 6:19-20 when he wrote the words. It does seem that the line, "my anchor holds within the veil," is meant to speak of the assurance we have in Jesus Christ, and that is exactly right. While the rest of the song does speak of the salvation we have in Jesus Christ, this one line is rather obscure, and it needs more explanation. Of course, that is not always possible in a song.

It does seem that when we sing songs, there are many times that words and phrases tend to need explanation. That is true of both old and new songs. So, what do we do? It would be good if song writers would heed the advice of my professors who said we must explain what we say and not assume that everyone knows what we are talking about, especially when we speak "Christianese." At the same time, there is the responsibility for the singer (and the hearer) to do some research and try to discover what they do not know.

I attempt to make clear the references I use in my sermons, but I suspect that sometimes I refer to things that some do not understand. If that happens, certainly you can ask. Or, perhaps better, do some personal study and discover something new. I know that I was encouraged and strengthened as I took the time to discover what "my anchor holds within the veil" means. I also came to understand that there is much more to know, and I am fairly certain that I will be doing some more reading so that I can understand more fully this powerful biblical reference so that the next time I sing that song, I will appreciate more what those six words mean.

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