

# **How Do You Know?**

**The Doctrine of God's Revelation**

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## 1 Starting Points

### **A dirty word for a messy world**

This book is for people living in a messy world. The evidence of the mess is all around us. I grew up towards the end of the Cold War and remember the day that the Berlin Wall came down. We were promised that this would usher in a new era with a peace dividend. One writer even claimed that we were seeing the end of history. We seem to be a long way from that day now. 9/11 shattered those hopes so that we now live once again under a shadow of war and terrorism.

I also remember listening to Bible talks as a child where a quaint illustration was used about the boy who redeemed his property from the pawn shop. It was quaint because back then, you would need someone to explain to you what a pawn shop was. These places where you could hand in your possessions as security against a loan had long since disappeared from our high streets most people had a reasonably secure standard of living, whether through paid employment or the support of the Welfare State. Today, walking through our local shopping street, it seems that every other shop is a pawn shop or offers to buy your jewellery or will provide you with a pay day loan. The shadow of debt hangs over many lives. Our church participates in a food bank service and each week we meet a steady stream of people whose lives are messy and full of hurt.

But it's not just something out there. The mess is something that starts at home and seeps out from it. I spend a lot of my time talking with people whose personal and family lives are messy, chaotic and painful. There's abuse, marital breakdown, loneliness, self-harm, addiction, guilt and shame. Most of us, if we are honest, will want to admit that we cause mess; that we inflict pain. We lash out at those who love us, we let down those who trust us, and we hurt those who help us. Indeed, we often hurt the very people we want to love.

The response to this mess has been a plethora of advice. The world is awash with self - help manuals and DVDs. Whisper it quietly, but you sometimes wouldn't be able to distinguish a Christian self - help book from a secular one.

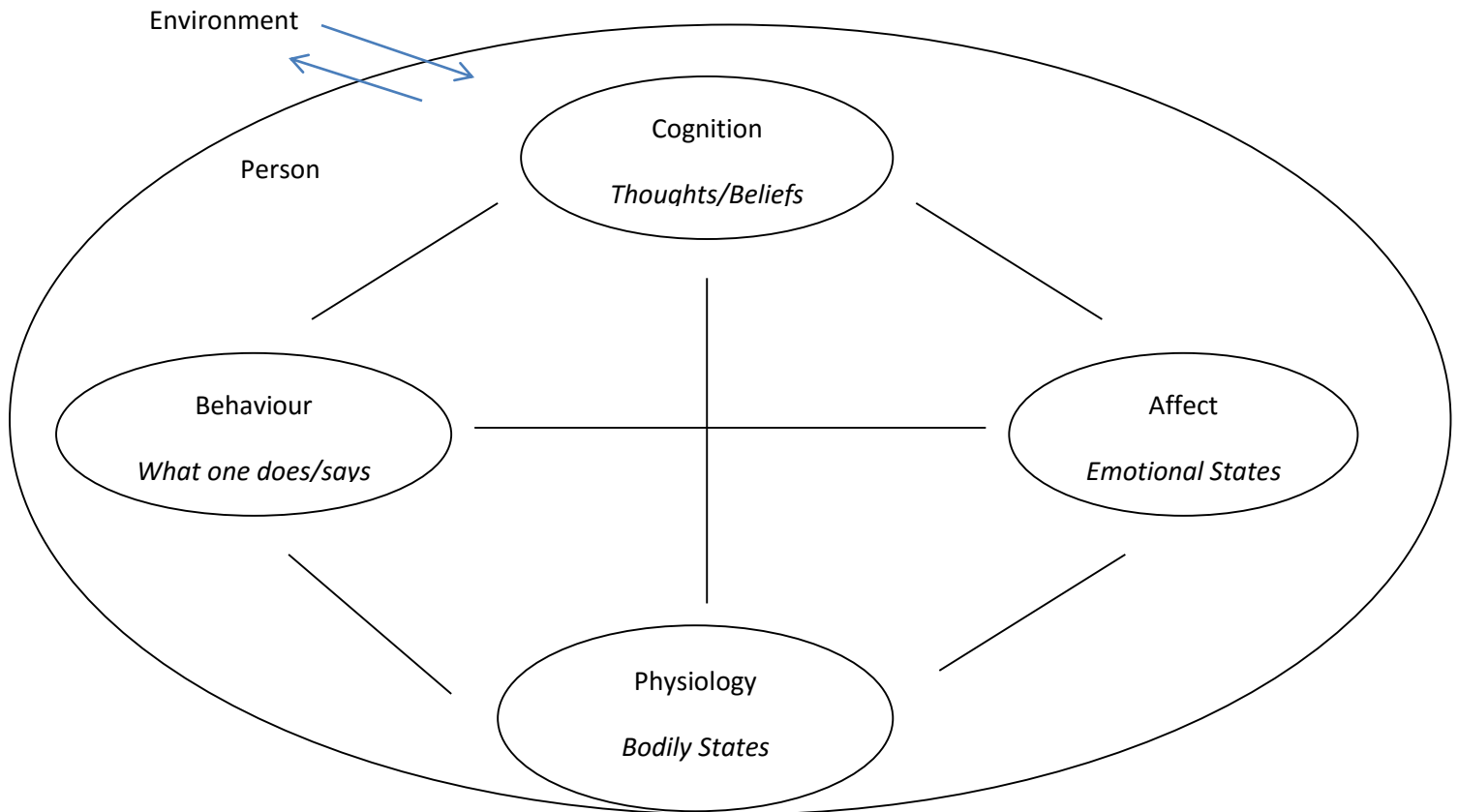
I want to suggest a different solution and it's a surprising one. It's going to involve something that has become a dirty word amongst Christians: "doctrine". You see, the root of our mess starts with a question of truth and that's what doctrine is all about: how we separate truth from lies.

In my study are lots of books. There are plenty of slim, glossy paperbacks offering practical solutions for living in a messy world and then there are the big heavy hardback books – the doctrine or theology books. In our minds, that's the distinction: practical, easy to read, useful and interesting versus dull, heavy (literally and metaphorical), difficult to read doctrine. The practical paperbacks are easy to come by. You can walk into any Christian bookshop and buy a copy; we have a church library with shelves crammed with recycled copies of such books. The big heavy doctrine books take a bit more searching out through Amazon or a Theological College's Library. That sends out a message – doctrine is for an elite group of people, professional theologians and nerdy introverts. This is a big mistake to

make. If doctrine is simply about helping us to know the truth and avoid error, then it is useful, practical, interesting and relevant for all.

### How belief shapes our lives

I want to introduce you to two really helpful diagrams. The first comes from a book all about helping people order the lives around a true account of the world. It's not a Christian book though. It's a secular book about psychology and therapy, specifically Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).<sup>1</sup>



The aim of the diagram is to show how helping a person face difficulties and mess in their life means treating the whole person. When someone's life is disordered, and particularly when that displays itself in aberrant behaviour or emotional problems such as depression, then there are a number of interrelated factors at play. Their emotional state and behaviour are affected by their cognition: in other words, the thoughts and beliefs that they carry in response to the environment in which they live. This, in turn, can have a knock on effect on their physical health so that, for example, someone can start believing something that isn't true: that everyone hates them and is talking about them. This might lead them to isolate themselves from social situations, leading to loneliness and depression. This depression will have a physical impact as the person becomes lethargic and feels physically unwell.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on diagram at David Westbrook, Helen Kennedy and Joan Kirk, *An Introduction to Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. Skills and Applications* (London. Sage, 2007), 6.

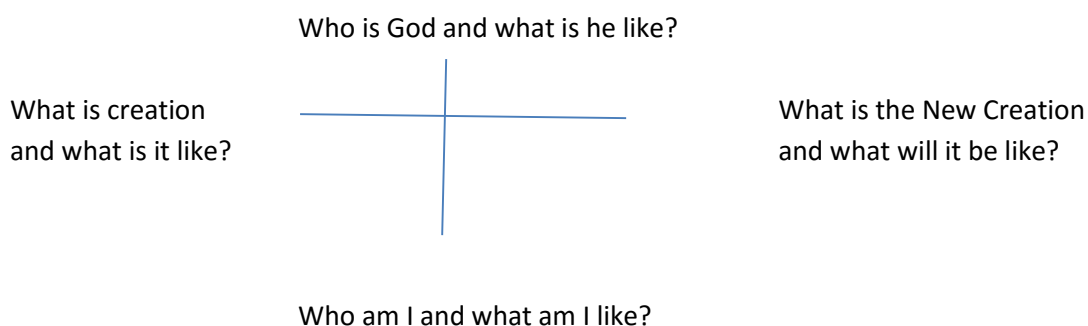
It can, of course, work the other way. Someone who is physically ill and in a lot of pain may well be prone to depression. This won't help if their illness disrupts their social life, leading to isolation and loneliness. In this desperate emotional state, there is the risk that they will begin to doubt things that they should know to be true: the kindness of others, the goodness of creation, that there is a God who is love.

So there's a strong connection between our beliefs and our physical and emotional state. Responding to the whole person means taking all of these factors into account. One of the ways we have responded to this at our church is by providing pastoral care workshops which include Biblical teaching on counselling with information about medical conditions and their impact. This is because:

- if someone is sad, unwell and/or tired, it will affect how they think and their spiritual health<sup>2</sup>
- if someone is spiritually in rebellion, it can lead to emotional and medical problems

The good news is that God is concerned with the whole person and one of our desires is to see people living healthy lives, simply because a healthy life is better than an unhealthy one.<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that we turn physical health and emotional well-being into idols. Living in a messy, fallen world means that we are likely to suffer and the Christian Gospel isn't about escaping suffering. It's simply about recognising that health and wellbeing are good things.

Now let's take a look at the second diagram. I don't know if it has ever appeared in a book. This is a diagram that Mike Ovey, Principal at Oak Hill Theological College in London, used to use to introduce his doctrine classes. Mike suggested that we can identify four doctrinal loci on which we choose to believe either truth or error. These are:



In other words, the mess that we see in our lives and in our world can be traced back to wrong understanding about these things. Good Christian Counselling will take us back to each of these points and make sure that we know, believe and act on the truth about each of them.

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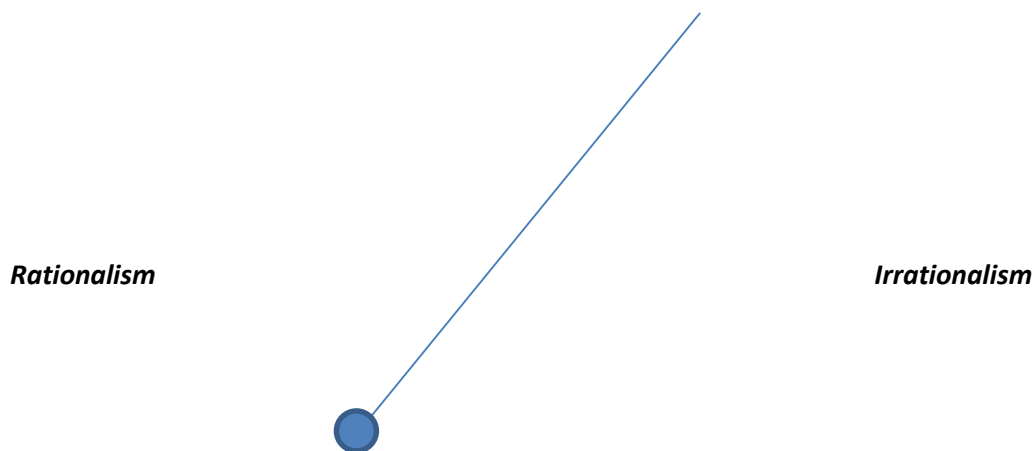
<sup>2</sup> See D Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Spiritual Depression* (Rpr. Glasgow: Pickering and Inglis, 1972), 14-19. (See especially page 18).

<sup>3</sup> Cf 3 John:2

## 2 How can we know anything about God, us and the World?

### The Pendulum of Rationality

In our first chapter, we saw that our whole life, what we think, how we feel, what we do and say is influenced by what we believe. We choose either to believe truth or lies about God, Creation, Humanity and New Creation. So how do we know what is true? Throughout history, there has been a dividing line between those who have an optimistic view of our ability to know the truth with certainty and those who are pessimistic about our ability to discover truth. It seems that throughout history, there has been a tendency in philosophical and religious thought to swing between the two extremes. I sometimes refer to this as the “The Pendulum of Rationality.”<sup>4</sup>



Rationalism involves presenting confidence in human ability to reason things out using the intellect and discover objective truth. The emphasis is on facts, knowledge and theories. The big question = “Is it true?”

Irrationalism is characterised by pessimism at human ability to reason things out and discover objective truth. The emphasis then becomes much more about experience and feelings. Does it feel good? Does it work? Specifically, does it work for me?

The idea that non-Christian worldviews are rooted in both rationalist and irrationalist thought is particularly associated with Cornelius Van-Til who argued that Adam and Eve were both seeking to be rationalists by claiming intellectual autonomy when deciding whether or not to eat the fruit and at the same time irrationalists because, by denying God’s voice, they were at the same time denying that there was an ultimate objective source of truth on which we can depend, thus regarding life in the Universe as in some sense arbitrary.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The study of how we know truth is sometimes referred to as Epistemology

<sup>5</sup> Cornelius Van Til, A Christian Theory of Knowledge (Philadelphia. P&R Publishing, 1969), 231-38.

At this stage, it might be helpful to introduce some of the terms and ideas associated with questions about how and what we know. We can only give a brief introduction here, so you may wish to follow up on some of these concepts for yourself.

### **Rationalism**

The rationalist claims that they can know and discover truth for themselves. In other words, they believe in autonomous human reason. They will talk about “a priori concepts” – truths that are self evident.<sup>6</sup> Truth is known through innate knowledge and deduction. We might particularly associate this approach with philosophers such as Plato and Descartes.

### **Empiricism**

Empiricists believe that we can only know for certain what can be observed. Historically, this approach is particularly associated with the philosopher David Hume. In contemporary terms, it is represented by the new atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens.

I tend to place this towards the middle of the pendulum. It is still on the rationalist side of the diagram. However, the arm has started to swing towards irrationalism. This is because if we assume that we can only know what we observe, then this tends to prompt the following sorts of questions:

- Can we really trust our observations?
- Is there any place for faith/spiritual/the transcendent?
- Can we discover true meaning?

Such questions lead to despair. We cannot really be sure that our senses are not deceiving us and that what we see and hear does not truly match reality. Such suspicions will only be exacerbated if you have grown up on a diet of movies of the “Matrix” ilk. The reaction to such questions tends to a swing towards Irrationalism and the assumption that the world is based on chaos and disorder. Truth is then seen as unknowable.

### **Romanticism**

A major response to empiricism was Romanticism and this approach still has a huge influence on the arts. Here the emphasis is on aesthetic qualities (beauty) and on passions or feelings such as love. The assumption is that we cannot reach transcendent truth through knowledge/intellect, so we reach it through experience/emotions.

Romanticism is particularly associated with the following philosophers, poets and artists: Rousseau, Swedenborg, Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth.

### **Post Modernism**

In recent times, the irrationalist position has been represented by Post Modernism. We associate Modernism with technology, industrialisation and the accompanying political philosophies of

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<sup>6</sup> Think of the opening lines of the US Constitution

Communism and Capitalism. Post Modernism can be seen as a reaction to modernity's failure to bring lasting peace and prosperity.

Post Modernism is associated with Philosophical Pluralism: the idea that there is no such thing as absolute truth. This means that all truth is relative. Something may be true for me but not for you.

Other terms associated with Post Modernism include Structuralism and Post Structuralism where a strong emphasis is placed on language analysis. Words are seen as chosen somewhat arbitrarily to signify concepts. This approach is particularly associated with philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida and Barthes.

### **The impact of Revelation**

Christians will want to stand back from the Pendulum and offer a different answer. As we saw earlier, both irrationalism and rationalism stem from an attempt to know truth autonomously for ourselves. The Christian will want to say to the irrationalist "you are wrong and the rationalist is right: truth is knowable." But they will also want to say "You are right and the rationalist is wrong: we cannot discover certain truth for ourselves."

So how do we know certain truth? In Romans 1, Paul says,

"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes...For in the Gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed." (Romans 1:16-17)

How can we know truth if we cannot discover it for ourselves? The answer is that truth is revealed to us. The Bible starts with the God who speaks. God says "Let there be light" and light appears. Throughout the Bible, we see that God continues to speak. He calls Noah and tells him to build a boat to preserve his family through a flood. He calls a man called Abram and promises him descendants, a land and blessing. He speaks to people through angels and prophets. It is in God's nature to reveal his character and plans to us. So Paul says that "what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them." (Romans 1:19). In fact, there is a sense in which the whole of creation shouts out God's name, pointing us to the one true God.<sup>7</sup>

The problem is not that God hasn't spoken clearly. The problem, says Paul, is that humans choose to reject the truth, to put our fingers in our ears so that we don't hear what God is saying, to suppress truth and to exchange it for lies, choosing to listen to lies we worship the creation God has made instead of the creator it reveals.<sup>8</sup>

So if we are going to know truth, then we need to start listening to God, the author of truth. How do we do that? How do we see and hear what God has revealed? That's where the chapters coming up are going to take us.

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<sup>7</sup> See Romans 1:20.

<sup>8</sup> See Romans 1:21-23.



### 3 How does God speak? Part 1: General Revelation

#### What is it?

Christian theologians tend to talk about two types of revelation: General Revelation and Special Revelation. General Revelation captures that sense which we have already considered that everything God does discloses something of who he is.

Three aspects of General Revelation have been suggested. First of all, the whole of creation points us to God's glory and calls us to worship him. Psalm 19:1 tells us that "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork." This includes God's power both in the first act of creation and in sustaining it through time. As 19<sup>th</sup> Century Theologian Herman Bavinck puts it,

...immediately linking up with the event of creation is the act of providence. This too is an omnipotent and everywhere present power and act of God. All that is and happens is, in a real sense, a work of God and to the devout a revelation of his attributes and perfections.<sup>9</sup>

This is brought out in the Apostle Paul's sermon to the Gentiles in Lystra.

Yet he has not left himself without testimony: he has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy. (Act 14:17)

Secondly, God's revelation is seen in history. We tend to think of God's acts in redemptive history: the signs and wonders through Moses, the calling of David as King, the miracles of Elijah etc. However, there is a sense in which God's ordering of wider history is meant to reveal his power and justice to us.<sup>10</sup> So in his speech on Mars Hill, Paul argues that,

From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. (Acts 17:26)

These are the more obvious, objective examples of General Revelation. However, John Calvin pushes us further, arguing that there is another way in which God reveals himself to us. Calvin argues,

That there exists in the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of the Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges that all to a man, being aware that there is a God, and that he is their maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, God has imprinted on our very being a sense of his existence. There is an innate desire to seek him, know him and worship him. I believe that Calvin is drawing on two places in Scripture here. First of all, positively, Ecclesiastes tells us that God has "set eternity in the hearts of man." There is an awareness and longing for the transcendent; a realisation that there is more to it than our

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<sup>9</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 307.

<sup>10</sup> See, Frame, *DWoG*, 76.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.iii.1. (Beveridge, 1:43).

temporary existence here. Secondly, there is the negative assertion that, “The fool says in his heart there is no God.” Awareness of deity is something so foundational to our being that it would be ridiculous stupidity to deny it. The result says Calvin is that “there is no nation so barbarous, no race so brutish, as not to be imbued with the conviction that there is a God.”<sup>12</sup>

Now there may be some aspects of these assertions that we balk at. Can we really be as strident as Calvin? Some of us may struggle with the description of the Atheist as foolish, even though it’s in Scripture. After all, there are plenty of reasonable, intelligent people who don’t believe in God. In fact, it often seems that the weight of intellectual debate and scholarship is overwhelmingly on the side of Atheism.

Well, hold onto those concerns for the time being because we are going to come back to them and address them later. Interestingly, even in Calvin’s days, many of the objections that we might have or encounter today were anticipated. So, for example, Calvin notes that some may argue that religion is simply an invention of those in power in order to control the masses, to which he responds with two rebuttals:

- a. That it would be impossible to use religion as a control if there wasn’t a pre-existing common awareness of God<sup>13</sup>
- b. That even those who generally show contempt, when confronted with their own mortality, show some fear of God<sup>14</sup>

### **What affect does it have?**

We have already seen that General Revelation does not simply convey neutral information. Rather, it is intended to draw out a response of wonder, praise and obedience to God as we see his greatness, his goodness and kindness.<sup>15</sup> This is the positive side of the coin, but General Revelation is also the basis of judgement. It acts as a witness against us and sin because, as Paul tells us in Romans 1, God’s revelation leaves us all without excuse. Remember how we saw in our second post that God has revealed his righteousness in the Gospel? (Rom 1:16-17) Well, Paul goes on to say that:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,<sup>19</sup> since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.<sup>20</sup> For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. (Rom 1:19-20.

There again, we have the sense, as suggested by Calvin, that God’s Revelation isn’t simply something objective and neutral out there for us to look at for ourselves and make decisions. It is effectively in our faces, unavoidable, undeniable. This is seen both in the idea that truth is made manifest to them (“known, plain”) but also in their response. Quoting the Dutch Missiologist J.H. Bavinck, Dan Strange notes General Revelation provokes a reaction: it “does not simply slide off man ineffectually like a

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<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.iii.1. (Beveridge, 1:43).

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.iii.2. (Beveridge, 1:44).

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.iii.2. (Beveridge, 1:44).

<sup>15</sup> Frame, *DWoG*, 76.

raindrop glides off a waxy tree leaf.”<sup>16</sup> The response is to suppress the truth. As Strange adds, “Suppression carries with it the sense of violently holding down.”<sup>17</sup> He offers the following vivid illustration: human response is like “that of a child playing with an inflatable ball in the water. She tried to hold the ball under the water with all her might and thinks she has succeeded, but the ball always pops up to the surface again for the child to try again and so on.”<sup>18</sup>

So General Revelation has much to say. Indeed, Calvin argues that it not only gives us some vague general idea that there is something more, but also points us to the God who is eternal and gives us hope for the future because as we look at God’s actions in history, we see both what he has done and the incompleteness of events. We see that God’s “mercy and severity are only begun and incomplete.”<sup>19</sup>

Bavinck argues that if we deny or ignore General Revelation then we lose a vital support for our faith<sup>20</sup> because General Revelation

...keeps nature and grace, creation and recreation, the world of reality and the world of values, inseparably connected. Without general revelation, special revelation loses its connectedness with the whole cosmic existence and life. The link that unites the kingdom of nature and the kingdom of heaven then disappears.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Limits of General Revelation**

And yet General Revelation falls short. It cannot give us the complete account of who God is and how we are to know him. Sin has corrupted our hearts so that we suppress the truth. Strange sees this as being an instantaneous response to the point where we may not be even conscious of the suppression.<sup>22</sup>

Calvin suggests two ways in which humans respond sinfully to General Revelation. First,

They do not conceive of him in the character in which he is manifested but imagine him to be whatever their own rashness has devised....With such an idea of God, nothing which they may attempt to offer in the way of worship or obedience can have any value in his sight, because it is not him they worship, but, instead of him, the dream and figment of their own heart.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> JH Bavinck, *The Church*, 124. Cited in Daniel Strange, “Perilous Exchange, Precious Good News: A Reformed Subversive Fulfilment of other Religions” (Pages 91-138 in Gavin D’Costa, Paul Knitter and Daniel Strange, *Only One Way: Three Christian Responses on the Uniqueness of Christ in a Religiously Plural World*, London. SCM, 2011), 112.

<sup>17</sup> Strange, “Perilous Exchange,” 113.

<sup>18</sup> Strange, “Perilous Exchange,” 113.

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.v.10. (Beveridge, 1:58).

<sup>20</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 322.

<sup>21</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 322.

<sup>22</sup> Strange, “Perilous Exchange,” 113.

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.iv.1. (Beveridge, 1:46).

Secondly,

To this fault they add a second – viz that when they do think of God it is against their will: never approaching him without being dragged into his presence and when there, instead of the voluntary fear flowing from reverence of the divine majesty, feeling only that forced and servile fear which divine judgement extorts –judgement which, from the impossibility of escape, they are compelled to dread, but which, while they dread, they at the same time hate.<sup>24</sup>

But even without the Fall, there is a sense in which General Revelation on its own is incomplete. It cannot tell us everything that we need to know about God. Bavinck comments,

On the insufficiency of general revelation, however, there can scarcely be any doubt. In the first place, it is evident from the fact that this revelation at most supplies us with knowledge of God's existence and of some of his attributes such as goodness and justice, but it leaves us absolutely unfamiliar with the person of Christ who alone is the way to the Father.<sup>25</sup>

And so, right from the beginning, there has been a close link between the General Revelation and Special Revelation. In Psalm 19, where we see creation singing of God's glory and pouring out praise, we also discover that God's will is revealed explicitly in Torah. Furthermore,

In the garden, Adam both heard the voice of God and saw his creative handiwork. His task was to relate these to one another in obedient response. God never intended man to attend to natural revelation while ignoring his spoken word. Similarly, after the Fall, God's verbal revelation accompanied His mighty, 'objective' redemptive acts.<sup>26</sup>

So Christians are meant to use General Revelation only through the lens of God's Special Revelation.

They position themselves in the Christian faith, in special revelation, and from there look out upon nature and history. And now they discover there as well the traces of the God whom they learned to know in Christ as their Father. Precisely as Christians by faith, they see the revelation of God in nature much better and more clearly than before.<sup>27</sup>

In our next chapter we will look at what Special Revelation is and how it works in more detail.

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<sup>24</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.iv.4. (Beveridge, 1:48).

<sup>25</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 313.

<sup>26</sup> Frame, *DKoG*, 144.

<sup>27</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 321.

#### 4 How Does God Speak? Part 2: Special Revelation

Imagine that you are watching one of those old silent movies. You are enjoying the different scenes. You catch something of the humour, pathos, danger and heroics from the way the actors interact with each other and the scenery. You watch their facial expressions. You see the way that the landscape around them changes. Suppose that someone suddenly turned the sound on for the film and you were able to hear the sounds of conversations and maybe a narrator's voice. It would be even better still if you could watch the film on DVD, playing back the special edition of the film complete with director's commentary. There's a sense there, isn't there, of our understanding and enjoyment of the film being sharpened and increased as we not only see what is happening but hear as well. A further level of enjoyment is created as we hear the explanations and the gaps are filled in.

The illustration is imperfect but hopefully it gives a sense of how Special Revelation is necessary to complete the picture. Special Revelation focuses in on the way that God has chosen to speak clearly to his people. Now, here's the frustration of theology and doctrine. We are introducing concepts about God and humanity that we are only really going to come to in detail later. We are taking about God's people and God choosing us before we have got to that stage. So, once again, we will need to bear with one another a little while and assume some things.

So what would we include or categorise as Special Revelation? Well, first of all, it will include situations where God appears to people and speaks to them directly and audibly. In the Old Testament, we find God walking in the Garden of Eden and talking with Adam and Eve; he speaks to Moses from within a burning bush and from Mount Sinai; he calls to Samuel in the Temple during the night. Sometimes he appears in human or angelic form. For example, in Genesis 18, he appears to Abraham along with two other "men," bringing the promise of a son, Isaac, and warning about his intention to judge Sodom and Gomorrah. In Genesis 32:22-31, Jacob meets and wrestles with a man at night. It only becomes clear later on that this is no ordinary man: God himself has met with Jacob, wrestled with him and blessed him. The invisible and infinite God chooses to appear in a particular form – whether through impersonal symbols such as fire or in personal, human form. Such appearances are often referred to as "theophanies."

Another category of Special Revelation is prophecy. Bavinck tells us that,

By prophecy we here mean God's communication of his thoughts to human beings. Often the word inspiration is used for this and is also more accurate insofar as the concept of prophecy is broader than that of inspiration, including as it does also the announcement of those thoughts to others.<sup>28</sup>

God chooses to reveal his will to specific individuals and uses them to communicate this to his people. For example, he uses Nathan, Elijah and Elisha to bring messages of encouragement, warning and judgement to the Old Testament Kings of Israel and Judah. He uses Isaiah and Jeremiah to warn the people about their sin and call them to repentance. When the people return from Exile in Babylon, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi are used to challenge their pride, forgetfulness and injustice.

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<sup>28</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 330.

Frequently, prophecy includes warning and judgements. "Prophecy consistently opposes the thoughts of God to the thoughts of human beings."<sup>29</sup>

Other ways in which God speaks clearly and directly through Special Revelation include dreams, visions and "interior illumination."<sup>30</sup> Bavinck notes that God even chooses sometimes to use forms of communication that we might at first associate with those lower forms, by which also among pagans the gods were deemed to make known his will.<sup>31</sup> These might include the lot, the Urim and Thummin, the dream and the vision."<sup>32</sup>

There is a sense in which God is condescending himself so we can understand him. If God is infinite and invisible, then how can we know him? If he is holy and his ways are not our ways, then we might think it impossible for God to communicate in an intelligible way with us. But what we see in Special Revelation is God getting down to our level and communicating to us in a way that we can understand. As Calvin famously expresses it:

God in so speaking, lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children? Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express what kind of a being God is, as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness. In doing so, he must of course stoop far below his proper height.<sup>33</sup>

Special Revelation has a particular focus and purpose and so we are not to think of it as just a category of unconnected acts, sayings and revelations. Rather,

The revelation that Scripture discloses to us does not just consist in a number of disconnected words and isolated facts but is one single historical and organic whole, a mighty world-controlling and world-renewing system of testimonies and acts of God.<sup>34</sup>

The focus of Special Revelation is on Salvation history: the story of how God has acted to call a people to himself, rescuing them from sin and death. In fact, this is the best way of defining Special Revelation, not so much by the mode and medium involved, but more by its content.

This means three things. First of all, Special Revelation has its focus in Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus is himself special revelation. John Frame reminds us that other things such as nature are not themselves God's Word.<sup>35</sup> "The word...is God. It is divine, not something created."<sup>36</sup> In John 1, we are introduced to Jesus as the one who is the Word of God, who is himself God, who is eternal and who has "made

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<sup>29</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 330.

<sup>30</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 334.

<sup>31</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 331.

<sup>32</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 331.

<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xiii.1. (Beveridge, 1:110).

<sup>34</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 340.

<sup>35</sup> Frame, *DWoG*, 76.

<sup>36</sup> Frame, *DWoG*, 76.

his dwelling place among us.” Jesus is God’s ultimate Special Revelation. He is the focal point of all revelation because in him, salvation comes. Unlike the theophanies of the past, God not only reveals himself in human form: he actually takes on human nature. This is the ultimate condescension. This focal point means that Special Revelation stands out from General Revelation because the latter can only make us aware of aspects of God’s character such as his greatness and power. Calvin may be right that there is a hint of his mercy there, but it is only through Special Revelation that we can truly understand God’s righteousness, love and forgiveness.

Secondly, the purpose of Special Revelation is to bring glory to God. Specifically, it glorifies him as the Triune God. There is again specificity in Special Revelation lacking in General Revelation because it is only here that we discover that we are to worship him as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>37</sup>

Thirdly, we will want to say that the place where Special Revelation is found is in Scripture (the Bible). We say this because this is the specific place where we learn to call God Father, where we are introduced to the person of Jesus, where we discover God’s plan of salvation and where we hear about the coming of the Holy Spirit.

In our next chapter we will go on to see how God speaks through Scripture.

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<sup>37</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 343 & 346.

## 5 Scripture the source of Special Revelation

### Introduction

Recently, someone visited our church and, after the sermon, came to speak to me. He thanked me for what I'd said, but then said, "I'd rather you had spoken from the heart, not a book." Now, it's important to check on what someone means when they offer critique. It could well be that my talk was exceptionally dull that morning or that I was just speaking at an intellectual level about things that I didn't seem to be passionate about. I don't claim to have the oratorical gifts of a fiery Welsh preacher, so maybe it was that. However, from the conversation, it seemed that his problem really was with me speaking "from a book." You see, I had stood there with my Bible open and constantly referred back to specific verses in the Bible passage. This man wanted to hear my thoughts and opinions, as became clearer during follow-on conversations. But no, I insisted that I would stick with telling him what "the book" says. Why? Well, simply, because as we have seen, this is the source of Special Revelation where God speaks to us clearly and authoritatively. In fact, I would go so far as to say that this is the only place that Christians should be going to and expecting God to speak.

The classic Bible text for helping us to understand the place and role of Scripture is 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

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 for every good work."

We're going to use these verses to guide us through our thoughts, but first of all, let's set them in their context. Timothy was one of Paul's companions and co-workers as he went around planting and establishing churches. Paul leaves Timothy behind in Ephesus in order to ensure that the fledgling church there is built up and guarded from falling into error. To make this happen, Timothy had to appoint trustworthy church leaders and make sure that they were well taught so that they could discern truth from error. Paul wrote two letters to Timothy which are now in the Bible, encouraging him in this task.

Here, towards the end of the second letter, he reminds Timothy again of his own example. He says "you... know all about my teaching, my way of life" (3:10). Paul had set an example of perseverance. He had faced opposition from those who attempted to physically stop him. He had encountered mobs, been thrown into prison and been beaten and stoned to within an inch of his life. He had also risked his life travelling, surviving several shipwrecks. He had needed to challenge false teachers who sought to distort the Gospel and, as a result, was slandered (see 3:10-11).

Now, Paul says that Timothy and those he is responsible for can expect the same because

In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and imposters go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. (3:12-13).

It's important to see this because 2 Timothy 3:16 is so well known that it is in danger of sounding quite tame. We can think of Bible reading as a comfortable thing: something we do for interest or pleasure. We might end up simply reading the Bible for intellectual stimulation or even because it seems to awaken some kind of emotional or spiritual experience within us. This is far from the case. Timothy is being reminded to stick with Scripture because the instruction he will find there is vital for anyone who wants to live for Christ. Scripture is for those who find themselves in dangerous situations: for



those who have to take risks at times. Scripture is for those who find themselves the lone voice in the crowd. Scripture is for those who genuinely love Jesus and want to be like him.

### **“All Scripture is God breathed”**

The first thing Paul tells us about Scripture is that it is from God – all of it. We use the word “Inspiration” to capture the sense of God breathing it. What does it mean to say that Scripture is “inspired”?

Well, first of all, let’s state what we don’t mean. We don’t mean that God magically provided us with a book already written. Inspiration has the sense that God works through human agents to bring his words to us. So, throughout the Bible, we find people who are chosen to speak for God and to write things down: lots of different people from all across society, from Kings and their courtiers to fishermen and country folk. Note as well that we are not talking about “mechanical dictation” where God simply uses humans as his secretaries. There are times when he gives the specific words for someone to write down or to speak out. However, quite often, what we discover is that the link is much more subtle; we see someone like Paul writing a letter with instruction, but it stands out from any other letters that he writes and people know that this is God’s Word. We find Luke, carefully researching, talking to eye witnesses so that he can write down his account. Then you have scribes like Baruch who worked with the prophet Jeremiah so that his oracles would be edited together into a book that also told the story of his ministry. It seems that, at times, you would even have people gathering together and compiling sayings that were well known outside of the community of God’s people and bringing them into Scripture (see Proverbs 22:17-24:34). John Frame comments:

The writers bring their own style to it but God is in control and is able to ensure that his words are communicated accurately. “It is like dictation because what Luke writes is exactly what God wants us to hear.”<sup>38</sup>

In other words, the writers bring their own gifts and style to the table so that what they produce is genuinely their own work. You can recognise their personality shining through in their writings, but this never takes away from the fact that God is in complete control of what they write. This is important because it also guards us from the opposite error to presuming mechanical dictation. Some people have focused so heavily on the human nature of Scripture that they treat it as merely an attempt by people to write about what they believe God to be doing and saying. For them, Scripture is a useful record of their observations, thoughts and feelings, but no more than that. It may even contain wisdom from God that we can use, but all of that will be tainted by human error: there will be mistakes and misconceptions that have to be detected and removed so that the truth can be mined out.

Frame helpfully defines inspiration “as a divine act that creates an identity between a divine word and a human word.”<sup>39</sup> It is that act which is important. It ensures that the human words will communicate exactly what God wants to say without error. This means that we can describe Scripture as “inerrant”

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<sup>38</sup>John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 142.

<sup>39</sup> Frame, *DWoG*, 140.

and “infallible.” These two words are used by theologians to describe Scripture’s quality as being both “without error” and denying “the possibility of error.”<sup>40</sup>

Technically, these descriptions are applied to the original manuscripts, allowing for the possibility that someone can make an error in copying and translating. Where errors in copying have occurred, the volume of ancient manuscripts means that careful textual criticism helps us to detect them and have a high level of confidence about what the original manuscripts said. Additionally, a distinction is made when talking about inerrancy between truth and precision. Inerrancy does not mean that the writers use technical language (for example with regards to science), rounding up and rounding down, hyperbole etc. Frame offers the following helpful illustration.

Outside of science and mathematics, truth and precision are often much more distinct. If you ask someone’s age, the person’s conventional response... is to tell how old he was on his most recent birthday.<sup>41</sup>

So “all Scripture is God breathed.” All of it! That little three letter word “all” is vital here. In other words, all of the books in the Bible are to be treated as authoritative. We cannot pick and choose. This is what we refer to as canonicity. The canon of Scripture is all of the books and writings that can be trusted as authoritative Scripture.

This also means, of course, that some writings are excluded from Scripture. For example, the Gnostic Gospels such as the Gospels of Thomas, Barnabas and Peter are excluded. In fact, it does not take too much of a look at these writings to see that they are not of the same type, value or authority as the four canonical Gospels.

It took time for the church to reach an agreed view of what the full canon was. This isn’t surprising. Different letters and Gospels would have initially gone to different places first and some may have reached a wider circulation quicker than others. However, as Frame comments,

The early church was divided by many controversies concerning basic doctrines, including the Trinity and the person of Christ. There were differences among the churches, too, as to what books were canonical. But it is remarkable how little they fought about this. Some of the differences had to do with geography: some books reached parts of the church before other parts. But remarkably, when in AD 367 Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria published a list of books accepted in his church, there was no clamor (sic).<sup>42</sup>

When deciding what to affirm as Scripture and what to deny, the early church used objective criteria such as apostolic authorship or at least indirect influence and certification (e.g. Mark/Luke).<sup>43</sup> “Other

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<sup>40</sup> Frame, *DWoG*, 169.

<sup>41</sup> Frame, *DWoG*, 171.

<sup>42</sup> Frame, *DWoG*, 136.

<sup>43</sup> Frame, *DWoG*, 137.

criteria used by early Christians were antiquity, public lection (those read in worship), and orthodoxy of content.”<sup>44</sup>

Scripture is designed to point us towards Jesus and his sufficient work on the cross. The fact that God has finally and fully spoken in Jesus means that there is no more need for additional Scripture and so the canon is closed (cf Heb 1:2; 2:2).

### **“Is useful for teaching...”**

Here’s a question: do you “teach/explain the Bible” or does it “teach us”? Scripture is clear that God has appointed people to teach. In fact, this ability to teach and “rightly divide Scripture” is a necessary qualification for church leadership. However, sometimes we can talk about this teaching role as though it is primarily about taking an obscure, seemingly irrelevant book and explaining its difficult to understand content in a way that makes it relevant. If that were true, would Scripture really be useful for teaching?

So, under this heading, I want to highlight something known as “the clarity of Scripture” or if for the sake of irony you would prefer a more obscure word “the perspicuity of Scripture.” Scripture is useful because it is clear. God has communicated in a way that all can hear and understand so that we are without excuse. Psalm 119:105 talks about Scripture and says “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” It is the world around us, our circumstances, the future and the decisions of others that are unclear, in the dark, needing the clarity and illumination that comes when God’s Word lights things up.

Frame identifies a few important qualifications to our understanding of Scripture’s clarity. First of all, he notes that

“This level of clarity does not apply to everything in Scripture. It pertains ‘those things which are necessary to be known, believed and observed for Salvation.’<sup>45</sup>

In other words, some parts of Scripture will be easier to understand than others. Generally speaking, we can say that the more vital the truth, the greater the level of clarity. This is true to our experience. John 3:16 is much easier to grasp than some chapters in Daniel.

Furthermore, clarity is not for everyone. Clarity comes as God’s Spirit illuminates God’s Word to our minds (c.f. Romans 8:4-5). In other words, hearing and understanding is dependent on faith. Jesus talks about how his parables exclude some even as others are drawn in closer to seek out the truth of the Kingdom (Matthew 13). This is not about how simply things are put though because often these things are hidden from the wise (Matthew 11:25).

The clarity of the Word, therefore is selective. It is for some, not all. It is for those with whom God intends to fully communicate.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Frame, *DWoG*, 137.

<sup>45</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith 1:7, cited in Frame, *DWoG*, 203.

<sup>46</sup> Frame, *DWoG*, 205.

Frame also notes that clarity is relative. We grow in our understanding of Scripture and we need help to do this.<sup>47</sup> “The clarity of Scripture is relative to the responsibilities that God places on each person” For example, a small child’s understanding will be different to an adult believer’s.<sup>48</sup> “Scripture is always clear enough for us to carry out our present responsibilities before God.”<sup>49</sup>

In fact, what I think we are seeing here is that the issue of clarity is not so much to do with Scripture itself as it is to do with our own weaknesses as a result of being human and fallen.

### **“Thoroughly equipped for every good work”**

The all-encompassing nature of Scripture’s effect is drawn out by the second half of verse 16 and then verse 17. Scripture is useful not just for teaching so that people acquire intellectual knowledge but also for “rebuking, correcting and training.” Sometimes people need to be taught facts on which to base their decisions, sometimes they need to be encouraged, sometimes they need to be shown how to do something. Sadly, all too often, they need to be corrected when they are getting something wrong (for example, they have listened to the deceit of one of the false teachers) and rebuked when they are in the wrong and falling into sin. It is Scripture that does these things and this in itself should be a corrective to us. Nothing that we can come up with will be more loving and encouraging than Scripture. At the same time, no matter how frustrated or cross we are, rebuke is God’s domain and we should let the Holy Spirit use Scripture to bring conviction and repentance.

The result of Scripture’s “teaching, correcting, rebuking and training” is that God’s people will be thoroughly equipped. This means that in Scripture they have everything they need to live fruitful lives in God’s service.

We talk about these things under two headings: the Necessity of Scripture and the Sufficiency of Scripture.

Scripture is necessary to our spiritual lives, in that without trusting Scripture we have no spiritual life; and it is sufficient in that if we have trusted Scripture, we have spiritual life.<sup>50</sup>

In other words, you cannot live the Christian life, pleasing to God, without hearing, knowing and understanding Scripture. Christians need to be regularly reading their Bibles and churches need to ensure that their gatherings are saturated in Scripture. It is no use simply to have one or two short readings. Time needs to be given to preaching so that Scripture is opened up and proclaimed, so that those who need help to grow in their understanding are helped, so that all are reminded again of its teaching, correction and rebuke. We need to be singing and praying Scripture. Our liturgy, if we use liturgy, needs to be rich in Scripture too.

Francis Turretin makes some careful distinctions when talking about necessity. He says that when talking about Scripture as written mode, this is not in and of itself necessary. We know this because people in the past survived without Scripture. God gave them enough revelation for their time through General Revelation and through Special Revelation delivered orally. However, he says that

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<sup>47</sup> Frame, *DWoG*, 203.

<sup>48</sup> Frame, *DWoG*, 207

<sup>49</sup> Frame, *DWoG*, 207.

<sup>50</sup> Frame, *DWoG*, 210.

Scripture as “doctrine delivered” is necessary because God has ordained that this is how we are to know him and hear him speak.<sup>51</sup> In other words, God is sovereign and could choose, and in the past has chosen to reveal himself in various ways, but he has sovereignly chosen to reveal himself to us through written Scripture. “God is not bound to Scriptures but he has bound us to them.”<sup>52</sup>

Frame says that Scripture is necessary because of the covenant nature of our relationship with God<sup>53</sup>

People often claim to have a personal relationship to Christ, while being uncertain about the role of Scripture in that relationship. But the relationship that Christ has established with his people is a covenant relationship and therefore a verbal relationship, among other things. Jesus’ words today are found only in Scripture. So if we are to have a covenant relationship with Jesus, we must acknowledge Scripture as his word. No Scripture, no Lord. No Scripture, no Christ.<sup>54</sup>

Sufficiency reminds us that if Scripture is what we need for Spiritual life, then we don’t need anything else either. This is important when we remember again the context. Christians facing difficult situations may at times be tempted to look elsewhere for guidance and encouragement. The church going through a period of opposition may want their preacher to stand up and rather than give a simple exposition to share a new vision or even a special word from the Lord for the way forward. The couple whose marriage is in trouble may turn to a secular counsellor hoping that the latest therapy will help. Yet, if we are to take Paul seriously here then for both these circumstances, it is Scripture that is needed and it is Scripture that will do.

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<sup>51</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, II.II.ii. (Giger, 1:58).

<sup>52</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, II.II.ii. (Giger, 1:58).

<sup>53</sup> Frame, *DWoG*, 211.

<sup>54</sup> Frame, *DWoG*, 212.

## 5 God's Word and its practical implications

### Introduction

The aim of this book is not to simply present theoretical information, but rather to help us think through the practical implications of what we believe. Having set out the Christian doctrine of Revelation, we are now in a position to think through its practical implications for individual and church life. In this section, we will begin to set out some practical applications. Of course, each application is worthy of more detailed attention and, in some cases, we will come back to look at the issues raised in more detail in later posts.

### We are to be a people gathered around God's Word

There is a strong theme running through Scripture that God shapes his people by his Word. Creation is formed by God speaking as he calls light and separates it from darkness, speaks into being the oceans and land, the stars and planets, the sun and the moon. He creates the first people and instructs them to fill the earth: he blesses them. He tells Adam and Eve how to live in the Garden of Eden. He speaks judgement against sin and calls Noah to build an ark so that his family will be saved. He blesses Abraham and promises him many descendants. He calls him to leave his home and promises him a new land. He calls Moses to lead the people of Israel from slavery to freedom. At Sinai (Horeb), God gives the people laws to live by when they are in the land which he has promised them.

In Deuteronomy 4:10, Moses reminds the people about how those events at Sinai had come to pass:

Remember the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, when he said to me, "Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children."

The Old Testament describes the people of Israel as an assembly; when this word was translated into Greek, the same word was used as is used in the New Testament describes the Church. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that commentators from an earlier age such as Calvin were in the habit of describing God's people in the Old Testament as the Church. The point of this assembly or gathering was so that God's Word could be proclaimed to them so that they would hear and obey.

This gives us a strong sense of what our priorities should be when we assemble as churches. There are plenty of good things that can and should happen: there will be praise and singing, prayer, etc. Of course, we cannot escape the practicalities of announcements and it's great to spend time catching up with one another. However, central to our gathering should be the hearing of God's Word.

I think that if we are to take this seriously then this will mean more than simply having one or two Bible readings during the meeting. Gatherings should be shaped by and saturated in Scripture. We

will want to give space for Scripture to be read aloud but we can also use liturgy and songs that are rich in Biblical quotations and allusions as well.<sup>55</sup>

Because of my belief in Scripture's role as the means by which God speaks authoritatively, it affects my approach to how we structure our Bible teaching in church life. I am firmly committed to an approach where we systematically work through a book of the Bible, taking a section each week and digging into it to find out what it has to say. This approach is known as expository preaching and differs from topical preaching where the preacher selects a subject and then identifies the relevant Bible texts which relate to the topic. Whilst the latter does at least rely on Biblical content (in some churches you will sadly not even get that but will be treated to the preacher's own reflections and opinions on a range of issues) it does run the risk that the preacher tries to shape Scripture around his priorities.

By working systematically through books of the Bible, you ensure that you cover all of Scripture including the bits that we find difficult to accept not just our favourite passages. It guards a congregation against a preacher's hobby horses or from him selecting a topic to preach at specific people or problems (sometimes the two may seem to be the same). In my experience, God's providence means that we are often surprised at how timely and relevant a particular Bible passage and sermon is to a situation without the preacher needing to manipulate or control the agenda<sup>56</sup>

### **We should take time to get to know Scripture for ourselves**

Psalm 1 describes the "Blessed Man." I think we can move towards a gender inclusive paraphrase of this though it's right to start with the "man" because first of all it reminds us that David would have seen the Psalm as an instruction for godly kings who followed his example and secondly it points us towards Jesus, the truly blessed and righteous man.

"Blessed" at its simplest is to do with happiness. It's the happiness that comes when we have God's approval over our lives. We are happy when we do not associate with wickedness or listen to corrupt advice. Instead, the happy person's "delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night." (Psalm 1:2). Law here refers immediately to the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). Actually, Torah is not just a law code as we would understand it but includes the retelling of redemptive history, poetry and song that celebrates God's goodness and predictions, warnings and promises for the future. We can widen out the application to the whole of Scripture.

Christians, both when they are assembled as church and individually, should take time to get to know God's Word. Older translations talk about "meditating" on God's Word. The idea is that we should take time to read it, slowing down to reflect on what it has to say, studying it closely to grasp its meaning, considering how we can respond obediently to what it says.

I do think it is right to encourage Christians to read their Bibles for themselves daily and for families regularly to study God's Word together. Remember though that this does not mean that we

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<sup>55</sup> To avoid lengthy footnoting here it's worth mentioning that I really owe the insights here to Chris Green, *The Message of the Church: Assemble My People* (Nottingham. IVP, 2013).

<sup>56</sup> On this see Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2004), 35-55.

become individualistic in our approach to Scripture. There's no room for personalised applications that are not tried and tested within the context of the local church.

As we have seen earlier, this soaking in God's Word is not meant to be seen as a safe, cosy, fluffy exercise. Rather, God's Word is given as teaching, correction and rebuke in the context of the trials and tests that come with opposition. This leads us to another application.

### **Scripture provides protection against abuse and false teaching**

It's worth noting how False Teaching works. In 2 Timothy 3:13, Paul talks about imposters who "go on" both "deceiving and being deceived." The subtlety of deception is that we can even convince ourselves of the stories we tell. The level of sincerity with which a deception is held to provides no excuse or justification. Romans 16:17-18 again highlights the subtle craft of the false teaching describing how "By smooth talk and flattery they deceive" (v18) with the intention of causing divisions (v17).

False teachers will use flattery and deception to try and isolate their target from the body of God's people. That is what division is all about. A sheep that has been separated from the flock is vulnerable to attack. So the message you are meant to hear is "no-one else really understands you: only I care." Then the false teacher seeks to silence God's voice. They will undermine their target's confidence in God's Word. There are various ways that they can do this. For example, in our day and age, the simplest way is to discredit the reliability of the Bible and question inerrancy so that the truth of Scripture is replaced with the false teacher's own ideas and opinions. However, a false teacher can claim to be committed to Scripture whilst deliberately misinterpreting it, ripping it out of context and wrongly applying it. They may well insist that you should only read Scripture through the lens of their own personal interpretation (e.g. through a prescribed study book or magazine). The target is weaned away from dependence on God to dependence on the false teacher. The aim of the false teacher is to gain and control a following for their own benefit (popularity, material wealth etc).

That's why consistent reading and exposition of Scripture in church life and personal meditation and study are vital. Those who have heard the true shepherd's voice will know to distinguish it from a false shepherd. Those who through consistently solid Bible teaching have developed confidence in God's Word will know not to be distracted and misled by alternatives which promise much but in reality offer little.

### **We need to make sure that we read Scripture correctly**

Mishearing what someone says can be potentially embarrassing, costly and dangerous. If we believe that we know God as he speaks to us through Scripture, then we will want to make sure that we read it correctly. After all, as we have seen above, false teachers are capable of twisting Scripture to fit their own aims. We too can misread Scripture.

This is why the discipline of Hermeneutics is an important one for believers to master. Hermeneutics simply means the way in which we read or interpret something. It has sometimes been referred to as the lens through which we read a book, piece of art, play, film, object, scene, factual description etc.



How do we know how to read Scripture correctly? How do we know that the interpretation we have made is the correct one, especially when so many people have different interpretations? These questions are worthy of further detailed study and discussion, but I would like to make a couple of observations here.

First of all, the best way to read something is in the way that it asks us too. We respect an individual by accepting their account of who they are, their personality, their likes and dislikes, their history at face value unless we are given good reason to suspect what they disclose. It's the same with a book and especially with the Bible as God's self-disclosure. The Bible invites us to read it as God's inspired word, not as human speculation. It promises us truth that will be useful and sufficient for all of life. That's our starting point. It also gives us clues about how to read the different parts of it so we distinguish between poetry, wisdom literature, history and story-telling. As we read and re-read the text in the light of its own self-disclosure, our understanding becomes sharper, just like when the optician adjusts the lens. This circling in to a more and more accurate reading has sometimes been referred to as the hermeneutic spiral.

Secondly, I encourage people to read Scripture together. There is a corporate dimension to this. We don't sit down in isolation and come up with our own speculative interpretations. We challenge each other, we check things out and we listen to wise teaching. That's why gathering as a church and in small groups is so important. There is a right sense of "tradition." This is not about the church handing down oral traditions as well as Scripture and it is certainly not about church leaders being able to develop their own new ideas. Rather, there is the sense that the church has held onto a right understanding of Scripture through the tests of time and we want to be careful of novel interpretations.

Thirdly, once again I'm indebted to Mike Ovey who used to remind his students that in a real conversation (as opposed to an imagined one) the other party may well disagree with you. We respect the other speaker when we permit them to disagree with us. If we find that Scripture never challenges us, never disagrees with us, always leaves us feeling reinforced and comfortable in our own ideas, then it might be time to stop and have a look at how we are approaching it. If God is genuinely speaking, then he must be allowed to disagree with us. If it is God who is speaking, then when we disagree, my only right response is to accept and obey what he says. In effect, I repent; I change my mind so that it is conformed to God's Word rather than my preferences.

### **Revelation provides the only solid foundation for Christian Apologetics**

Our understanding of revelation and Scripture will have an impact on our approach to apologetics. Apologetics is all to do with the ability to give reasons and defence for our faith. This is a whole subject in itself worthy of a lot more attention (perhaps it will get it in later posts!) However, briefly, we can say the following.

Apologetics is often presented as an exercise where one finds neutral ground to share with your interlocutor. On the basis of reason and empirical observation, a case is set out for the existence of some form of deity and from there, gradually, the enquirer is invited to consider the possibility that this deity is personal and is the God of the Bible. This is the classic approach to apologetics and is

exemplified in the classic work “Natural Theology” by William Paley.<sup>57</sup> One problem with this approach is that it does not necessarily bring you into land at the right spot. For example, through such means, the eminent Atheist Anthony Flew changed his mind and accepted that there was a God. However, as far as we can tell, he failed to make the move from a general belief in deity to specific knowledge of and faith in the one true God revealed in Jesus.<sup>58</sup>

So my preference is for an approach called Presuppositional Apologetics. The basis of this approach is that first of all there is no neutral ground to meet on. Instead, we must do two things. First of all, we must step into the other person’s world and understand them. Secondly, we do not leave our own world and foundations behind; rather, we speak on the basis of God’s revelation. Thirdly, the nature of presuppositional apologetics is that it uses the truth of revelation to show the failings and inconsistencies in their world view because it is based on false foundations (presuppositions). Fourthly, it shows that to make sense of life, the world, everything, we need to build our worldview on the solid foundation (presuppositions) of God’s revelation in Scripture.

This raises again the question asked in an earlier post. If God’s revelation is clear and sufficient, then why do so many people not accept it? We can identify three main categories here.

- a. Why do some people choose not to believe in God (atheism) or at least to reserve judgement (agnosticism)?
- b. Why do some people come to a different conclusion about what God is like, worshipping other gods or other versions of God?
- c. Why do some professing Christians seem to go so badly wrong in their understanding of God’s Word leading to error and false teaching including liberalism? (It is worth referring back to the section on the clarity of Scripture here).

This is something we will need to keep coming back to and will specifically return to when we have had chance to look in more detail at what we believe about Creation and Humanity. At this stage we can say the following.

First, this is one of those points where we may struggle with Scripture and want to disagree with it. However, our required response is to believe what it says in Romans 1 about God’s clear revelation. This may mean that we haven’t fully understood what Paul says and why he says it, but belief is the starting point.

Secondly, a key point that Paul is making in Romans 1 is that ignorance is not to be confused with innocence and is not a merely passive state. We are ignorant of truth because we choose to suppress it.<sup>59</sup> There is also a sense in which people choose the authorities which they go to because they prefer the answers they will give. I know that there are people who will gravitate to me for advice rather than another church leader because they think my advice will be more to their liking and of course vice-versa (that’s why plural church leadership is so important as church leaders work together to ensure that they are not played off against each other). That some, indeed many, prefer

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<sup>57</sup> William Paley, *Natural Theology*,

<sup>58</sup> I say “as far as we can tell...” based on the writings we have from him. It is of course unwise to attempt definitive statements when only God knows what exactly went on in his final days and hours.

<sup>59</sup> Strange, “Perilous Exchange,” 113.

to listen to Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens does not mean that a discerning mind will not see through the logical inconsistencies in their argument over time.

Thirdly, our ignorance includes an element of judgement. Remember that Paul refers to us as being handed over. Fourthly, ignorance of the truth and acceptance of error tends to be a progressive thing. As people exchange truth for lies and the revelation of God for idolatry, then there is an increased darkening of their minds.

Fifthly, remember the image of the beach ball being submerged under water only to bounce back again.<sup>60</sup> Truth will out. There will be those nagging thoughts caused by inconsistencies in our world view: "This cannot be right...." "There must be more than this...." "Why are they different...?"

Later, when we look at what we believe about humanity, we will consider in more detail the way in which sin has an impact on our understanding. We will also consider to what extent Paul's comments refer to us individually and to what extent they refer to us corporately as the whole human race.

### **Revelation is the only basis for genuinely helpful, loving and life changing pastoral counselling**

Our approach to counselling is also rooted in our understanding of revelation. This has some important implications.

First of all, it means that we as Christians are responsible for counselling. The Bible talks about bearing one another's burdens and encouraging and correcting one another. Pastors and elders have a particular responsibility for this. So there is a danger in simply passing on cases such as marital problems or addictive behaviour because we see these issues as not our responsibility, too difficult or too time consuming. The first danger is that the people we hand over to may have qualifications and accreditations, but they are not actually competent to counsel because they don't understand the spiritual dimension. Heath Lambert comments that:

Secular psychotherapists ....are very well intentioned but ultimately seek to help people solve their problems while ignoring Christ and his Word. They have rejected the Godward dimension of counselling, moving in the opposite direction to claim that God and his people should have little or no role to play in the counselling task. Their diagnosing of and their attempts at 'curing' people and their problems are man-centred and so will always fall short of offering people true and lasting change to their deepest problems."<sup>61</sup>

Jay Adams, the founder of the Biblical Counselling movement, was highly sceptical of secular psychotherapy. He argued that:

Biblically, there is no warrant for acknowledging the existence of a separate and distinct discipline called psychiatry. There are in the Scriptures, only three specified sources of personal problems in living, demonic activity (principally possession), personal sin and organic illness. These three are interrelated. All options are covered under these heads,

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<sup>60</sup> Strange, "Perilous Exchange," 113.

<sup>61</sup> Heath Lambert, *The Biblical Counselling Movement After Adams* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2012, 21-22.

leaving no room for a fourth: non organic mental illness. There is, therefore, no place in a biblical scheme for the psychiatrist as a separate practitioner.<sup>62</sup>

The point is that if we are not dealing with a bona-fide medical issue, then the secular counsellor cannot offer hope. They miss the point that the solution to the person's problem is a right relationship with the God who made them. They look instead for alternative explanations and solutions.<sup>63</sup>

The second issue is that we are abdicating our own God given responsibility for our brothers and sisters. Christians are called to bear one another's burdens and to encourage and challenge one another. Pastors and elders have a particular responsibility for seeking to proactively care for the spiritual wellbeing of those in their churches. So after noting the misunderstanding caused by secular psychology, Lambert goes on to rebuke church leaders

A second group misunderstanding the issue –is ironically- conservative Bible believing, Christ exalting ministers of the Gospel. These conservative ministers fail to grasp that counselling is an essential part of ministry and so disconnect theology from counselling. They demonstrate the misunderstanding every time they say things like, “Oh I don't counsel people; I'm a preacher.” Or “Counselling takes too much time away from other ministries,” or “I don't think the Bible has anything to say about this problem; you need to see a professional.”<sup>64</sup>

Now none of this is to say that we take a narrow, simplistic view of things or we assume arrogantly that we can deal with things on our own. It is helpful at this point to remember two things. First of all, remember the diagram we started with from the CBT manual. We remember when we deal with others that we are dealing with the whole person. So first of all, there is the medical dimension. Indeed, as we saw earlier, Adams draws the same links, noting that medical, spiritual and behavioural issues are “interrelated”<sup>65</sup> Often, one of the first things we do when counselling people is to talk through the medical situation. It is reasonable to insist that before we begin counselling that the person is following medical advice and taking appropriate medication.

Secondly, we have seen that there is both Special and General Revelation and the competent counsellor will not ignore general revelation. Rather, they will see General Revelation as useful in its place, under the authority of Special Revelation and interpreted through the lens of Scripture. We will want to pay attention to wise, practical advice even if it comes from secular sources. We will not wish to ignore the learning of others. In our church, we have a number of medical practitioners including those with expertise in neurology and mental health care. We also have members who

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<sup>62</sup> Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual* (Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan, 1973), 9-10. Cited in Lambert, *The Biblical Counselling Movement*, 37.

<sup>63</sup> For a classic example of an attempt to construct an alternative to the Gospel see Carl Gustav Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, (First Published 1933, London, Routledge Classics, 2001).

<sup>64</sup> Lambert, *The Biblical Counselling Movement*, 22.

<sup>65</sup> Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual* (Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan, 1973), 9-10. Cited in Lambert, *The Biblical Counselling Movement*, 37.

work in secular fields such as educational psychology. One member is currently pursuing a PhD in this field and investigating the relationships between a child's health and wellbeing and the medical history of the family. This means that they have access to a wealth of learning about medical science, the human body and brain and also about human behaviour (socially and individually). We would be foolish not to listen to their experience and insights, especially as because they are believers, they submit their learning to the authority of Scripture. Adams puts it this way:

I do not wish to disregard science, but rather I welcome it as a useful adjunct for the purposes of illustrating, filling in the generalisations with specifics and challenging wrong human interpretations of Scripture, thereby forcing the student to restudy the Scriptures. However, in the area of psychiatry, science largely has given way to humanistic philosophy and gross speculation.<sup>66</sup>

So, in summary, Christian counselling is Biblical counselling. In fact, one thing I have learnt is that no matter how harsh and difficult to bear we may perceive the words of Scripture to be, God's law will always be more loving and gracious than human attempts at mercy. The purpose of Christian counselling is not to soothe the counselee and help them feel better with warm words of comfort and it is certainly not the place where we merely offer the benefits of our own insights and experience (though good counselling will of course carry the impact of the counsellor's experience). Rather, our aim is to help the person see what God's word has to say about their situation and how they are called to respond in obedience, even when that response may mean further suffering. The end result will of course be the blessing or happiness that comes to those who delight in God's Word.

## **Conclusion**

We have seen that the Christian view of revelation, knowing that God has spoken clearly, authoritatively and finally gives us great confidence as we seek to know and worship God and to live godly lives for him.

Shortly, we will move on to find out what God has revealed about himself in more detail. As we go along, the aim is to keep thinking about what we see and learn impacts practically on our lives both as individuals and families and corporately as the Church. Before that, I want to pick up on some of these practical implications of God's Revelation in a little more detail.

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<sup>66</sup> Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, xxi. Cited in Lambert, *The Biblical Counselling Movement*, 39.

## **7 How can we help?**

### **The conversation you rather wouldn't be having**

"I just don't think we can go on. We've tried everything. It's time to go our separate ways." With those words, you are asked to give your blessing to divorce. Or, you're sat talking with a young member. They've recently started dating someone who is not a Christian. "It feels so right" they tell you. "Why would God allow me to have these feelings if they are wrong?" they ask. "Perhaps over time I can lead him to Christ" they suggest hopefully.

These are some of the questions that we find ourselves dealing with in everyday life. I hesitate to use the word "pastorally" partly because it is a word used rarely outside of church discourse and partly because it can leave the impression that these are questions for pastors, for the professional clergy. But they are not. Whilst pastors up and down the land will be facing those questions and issues, so will many other Christians. It might be one of your youth club members, dropping the bombshell over the table tennis net; a colleague at work, during the tea break; your own son or daughter at breakfast.

### **Let's find out together**

The thing is that when these questions come we can be left floundering and searching our minds for appropriate, non-inflammatory, wise answers; we offer every bit of advice going, except what the Bible says. Yet, over the past few weeks, we have been arguing that the very place we need to turn to for truth on these matters is the Bible.

So I want to suggest another way of approaching this. Now, one of the reasons why we risk missing out on what the Bible says is that we are afraid of coming across as judgemental and preachy. Well, let me make a suggestion. If we go to what the Bible says, then there is a great opportunity here to depersonalise and defuse a potential confrontation. It is no longer about what I think but about finding out together what God says. In fact, this is discipleship as modelled by Jesus's first followers. Remember in John 1 how Andrew and then Phillip met with Jesus and then went to find their friends to introduce them to Jesus as well?

My initial response to the person is to say something along the lines of "Well, it's not really my opinion that counts. Why don't we find out together what God's Word has to say on the matter?" If they are willing to take this further, then we sit down and talk through how we are going to approach things. In effect, we are setting out our terms of reference and an agreement or contract about the way ahead.

I make some promises. The first one is confidentiality. However, confidentiality is not secrecy and I never promise this. Information will only be shared with those who need to know and to the extent that they need to know. The second is honesty. I will not shrink back from talking truthfully from God's Word, even if at times they may feel hurt or offended by what God's Word says. However, I will be doing this not to harm them, but out of love and concern for them. The third thing I promise is that I am with them for the long haul. I'm not just going to offer some pat answers and then leave them to it. I will keep travelling with them.

### **The Big Picture**

Now, when it comes to looking at what God says, this does not mean that we collect a few proof texts to support an argument. In fact, there may not be any immediately obvious verses and passages about the situation, or at first glance you may think that you can come up with apparently contradictory passages to support different answers.

So the first thing we need to do is get a feel of what the overall sense of Scripture is on a matter. In other words, how does what we know about God, Us, Creation and New Creation affect the way in which we approach the question. That's why it's important to have a grasp of Systematic Theology which attempts to sum up the whole Bible's teaching on any given matter. If I believe that God is Sovereign and loving, then how will that affect my approach to my marriage? If I believe that a good creation, including us, has been corrupted by sin, then how does that affect my trust in my own feelings? If I believe that there is hope of New Creation, then what does that say about my momentary struggles and suffering?

### **The Big Story**

The other dimension to getting a sense for Scripture's overall tenor is the Bible story-line. So I find it helpful to remind people about the story of redemption through the Bible. In Scripture, we read about the loving God who made a good creation, about humans who sinned and rebelled and then about the God who acts to redeem us, choosing a people to be his own, disciplining them when they sinned, sending his Son as the substitute for sin, proclaiming the good news of salvation to all through the church, promise that one day the Son will return and make all things new.

We want to think about where the situation we are facing fits into that storyline. For example, the person contemplating separation is reminded of two things. First of all, that part of the story is about God making man and woman and bringing them together to complement each other. Secondly, they are reminded of the bigger narrative of the God who chooses a people for himself to be his Holy Bride.

### **The Detail**

There's still the hard work to do. Finding out what God's Word says means sitting down and studying Scripture carefully together as we identify relevant Bible passages. It means making sure that we understand a Bible passage in context. It means working through it line by line to grasp its meaning. It will mean doing homework before we meet up!

So as we come to the marriage situation, we begin to talk about the fact that the Bible does have some things to say about divorce and circumstances in which it may or may not be permitted. Scripture tells us what a good relationship should be like where reciprocal love exists. But Scripture also has a lot to say about how we live and witness in relationships (both in work and the family) where love and good will are not reciprocated. Scripture talks about the grace and hope that makes it possible for us to keep going even when we feel like giving up.

## **8 Spiritual Warfare**

“I think my house is haunted; there’s an evil Spirit present. Will you come and do an exorcism?” How would you respond to this request? Or what do you do when someone confidently announces that the reason that the evangelism team are struggling is because of territorial spirits? They suggest a prayer march through the town to reclaim the ground.

Once again, if we are going to respond to these issues correctly, then we want to respond by finding out what God’s Word reveals about these things. This may mean leaving behind a lot of traditions, assumptions and sadly, even within evangelical Christianity, blatant superstition about Spiritual Warfare.

### **A good place to start**

Ephesians 6:10-18 is an obvious starting point for discussion & teaching on Spiritual Warfare and rightly so because it gives a detailed account about how to face it. Paul says, “We are not fighting flesh and blood enemies ...” – a reminder, because we get terribly personal and see other humans as our enemies, that they are not the enemy. We are asked to look at the bigger picture of what is going on, rather than the quarrel or tussle in front of our face (this theme is also picked up in Job).

To get the bigger picture, it is helpful to put Ephesians 6 in the context of the whole book.

### **A quick tour through Ephesians**

The letter starts with Paul’s affirmation of God’s sovereignty. God is the one who chooses us to be in Christ. His purpose is to bring everything together for, through and under Christ (1:10). In Ephesians 1:20, we see that Christ is raised and seated in the heavenly realms” above all other spiritual powers. If we are in Christ, then we are with him where he is. If he is above the spiritual powers, then we have no need to fear them or to try to appease them.

Ephesians 3:10 tells us that God displays His wisdom through the church to spiritual authorities. God’s display of the church is a spiritual warfare motif. God shows those authorities which seek to deny or challenge his authority that his purpose was right and has succeeded in Christ.

This doctrine leads to practice:

In Chapter 4, we see that we have a calling and are to live lives worthy of it. Key to this calling is the unity of the Church; note that there is a Trinitarian dimension to this (4:3-5)

Church leaders have a specific responsibility to equip the church. Teaching leads to gifting for the sake of unity (4:11-13.) This also results in maturity and so the church is guarded from deception. It is firmly rooted and anchored.

Rooted and anchored Christians live Godly lives in the light (4:17-5:14). In the Bible, light is associated with life and truth from God in opposition to works of evil that are carried out in the darkness. Alert lives in the light require that we are “filled with the Spirit” (5:19. This is contrasted with drunkenness. In other words, we should not be under the control or influence of alcohol; rather, God should control and influence the whole of our lives.



This leads to a number of things in church life, including singing, giving thanks and submitting to one another (note this is all part of the same sentence) (5:19-21).

Then we are given some specific contexts where submission happens (5:22-6:9)

Husbands and Wives

Parents and Children

Masters and slaves

There is order and there are roles but it is not about status or hierarchy. Wives, children and slaves are to submit, but husbands are to sacrificially love their wives, fathers are not to exasperate their children and masters are to treat their slaves in the same way. For husbands and wives, the theme of “unity” developed in the letter is carried through into their specific circumstances. They are “one flesh.” So Christian life takes place in the church, home and workplace.

### **Ephesians 6 and armour for warfare**

We are told to put on the whole armour of God (Ephesians 6:13) but notice the words used to describe it: truth, righteousness, peace, faith. In other words:

- a. It means putting on the gospel
- b. It means putting on or being in Christ

### **Implications**

The context of Spiritual warfare is everyday life. I am inclined to suggest that it is not primarily about detecting demons, carrying out exorcisms or conducting prayer walks.

I note the two extremes of denying demonic activity and seeing demons everywhere. Demon possession is possible, though based on what Scripture says, I would argue that:

- a. It is about people, not buildings and places
- b. Only unbelievers are at risk of possession— because believers are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ
- c. Whilst it does happen, I think it is probably rarer than assumed. Biblically, there seem to be clusters of these sorts of incidents so there seems to be a specific concentration of this activity around the time of Christ because of what was uniquely going on there. So my inclination is to check for other explanations first including
  - i. The need for people to take responsibility for their own habitual sin
  - ii. Characteristic traits and temperament
  - iii. Ill health
- d. We should be particularly aware of issues where people have engaged in occulting practices, Ouija boards, invocations etc.

The devil’s strategy is to tempt us into sin, to isolate people from God’s community, to discourage us, to get us away from God’s Word and to cause disunity. Once again, it’s about everyday life.

So Spiritual warfare primarily will mean

1. Preaching the gospel so that those who were God's enemies are brought into the Kingdom (Ephesians 2:1)
2. Continue to preach the Gospel to believers, reminding them that they are in Christ so that they are "armed," having Christ's righteousness, knowing the truth and being shielded by faith
3. Teaching God's Word faithfully. This is back to Eph 4 again. It is the revelation of God's Word that will equip us and protect us.
4. Praying constantly

This may not sound as exciting or romantic or even as spiritual as some of the things we are encouraged to do in some books or when we attend some conferences about Spiritual Warfare. However, when it comes to going into action, I'd rather follow the clear instructions of the commanding officer who can see the whole battlefield in space and time than rely on the speculation and imaginations of others in the trenches.

## 9 Sorry! Some worked examples in Apologetics

### The questions we want to ask...and answer

If God exists, why doesn't he show up and prove it? If the Gospel is true, why is the church so full of hypocrites and killjoys? If God is love, then why doesn't he stop all the suffering in the world? Can I really trust the Bible to be true? Any Christian who has tried to tell someone else about their faith is likely to have heard at least one of these questions and objections. So how do we respond?

Earlier, we said that belief in the God who clearly reveals truth about Himself, Us and the World around us will shape our approach to Apologetics. Apologetics is the art or science of arguing a case in order to defend your position and challenge your opponent's point of view. In other words, it's about being able to "give a reason (apology) for the hope that you have."

We have argued for an approach to apologetics called "Presupposition Apologetics." We work from the foundational belief (presupposition) that to know truth, we need God's revelation as supremely found in Jesus Christ and from that basis, we want to challenge the presuppositions of unbelievers by arguing that only by making the revelation of Jesus Christ their foundational basis of truth can they make sense of the World around them.

This means that whenever we deal with an objection or question, we will want to start with Jesus. Why do we do that? Well, imagine that you have been asked that question "How do you know God exists?" There are a number of ways that you could answer the question and several philosophical proofs that you could offer. For example, you could invite them to look at the World around them, its beauty and order and from there, go on to argue that there must be a designer behind this order.

There are two problems with this. First of all, by doing this, I am assuming that we can use our own human reason to discover the truth about God and the universe, but we have already identified the folly of relying on human reason in an earlier post.

Secondly, this still leaves me a long way from where I want to be. I really want to be talking about Jesus and the Cross, but the conversation is circling around philosophy and science. How do I get from where I am to where I want to be? For me, the light went on at an evangelism workshop led by Paul Williams, vicar of Christchurch Fulwood in Sheffield.<sup>67</sup> Paul said "Why not just go straight to Jesus?"

This reflects our own presuppositions, namely:

The necessity of Revelation – we believe that we can only know truth because God reveals it to us through Scripture

The centrality of Jesus – we believe that the key thing is a relationship with Jesus

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<sup>67</sup> Paul models this in his book co-authored with Barry Cooper "If you could ask God one question".

Not only that, but people love a good story and the true stories about Jesus and the stories (or parables that he told) are vivid, down to earth and engaging. So here are some worked examples of how we might do this.<sup>68</sup>

### **Jesus and the proof of God's existence**

Question: How do I know that God exists?

Response: What kind of proof would you be looking for?

Answer: He would need to actually show up and do something in front of my eyes!

At this point, I want to offer them a positive presupposition. I want to introduce them to Jesus. So I will tell them about the one who told the wind and waves to be silent. The one who has control over the elements is God himself showing up and doing something. From here, I'm able to take them to the further truth that this God revealed in Jesus also has control over life and death and that we see this in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Now, this will of course lead to another question or objection. Can I trust the account? Is it just a made up story? We will want to follow this up. I would acknowledge the question right at the start and promise that we will have time to test the reliability of Scripture in our conversation(s). However, the issue we are coming to here is this:

His/her presuppositions are going to cause him to struggle to accept the evidence demanded here. Acknowledge that with respect, but note then that this is the very problem with his requirement.

- a. He is really saying that only if something happens to him will he believe – he isn't alone in that: in fact, many people at Jesus's time still rejected him and the Gospels honestly record this (itself part of the evidence for their reliability)
- b. So even if he did see for himself, would he believe? This is the problem with empiricism –can I really trust my own eyes? Can I really be sure that a causes b? (Note: a famous Empiricist, Hume, argued that you cannot prove a causal link between two things: all you can do is observe that they are related).
- c. When I insist on seeing the evidence in front of my eyes, am I being consistent? Here we can talk about the things we accept on the basis of credible reports. We accept historical accounts, reports of events that we were not present at, the claims of doctors that medical therapy will cure us etc.

In fact, what we often find when talking about Biblical miracles is that a wrong standard of proof is set. In Science, something is proven when it has been observed and repeated. That's good news for those of us who rely on prescription medicine. But history does not work like that. Some events are once in a lifetime. Imagine trying to tell someone in 20 years' time that a little known bottom tier football team beat three of the top teams in the country and made it to a Wembley Cup final, less

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<sup>68</sup> This is just for starters. If you want to see these questions handled in greater depth in a winsome and persuasive manner, then have a look at Williams & Cooper, *If You Could Ask God One Question* and Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York. Dutton, 2008).

than a year after nearly going out of the league and out of business altogether. Well, it all sounds rather made up doesn't it? It's the sort of story you get in a boy's football comic. Except this happened to the team I support, Bradford City, who beat Wigan, Aston Villa and Arsenal, all Premier League Teams at the time, on the way to the League Cup Final in 2013. Sadly, they didn't complete the fairy tale by winning the cup!

Now, we won't be able to repeat the experiment in 20 years' time. History doesn't repeat itself. In fact, belief in history repeating itself is referred to as historicism and is considered bad history. However, there will be the reports of eyewitnesses faithfully passed on.

Which takes us to the next question: is Scripture a trustworthy authority and, if so, what sort of authority?

### **The follow up question – Can I trust Scripture?**

We've argued for the existence of God based on what the Bible says about Jesus. Yet, with the Bible, we have a 2000 year old book (parts of it much older than that). How do we know that it is telling the truth? Isn't it biased propaganda? Weren't the people who wrote it ignorant fishermen who were used to believing in myths and fairy tales in the absence of accurate scientific explanations? Even if they were telling the truth, what's to say that the Bible hasn't been corrupted and changed along the way?

The temptation at this stage is to go straight for evidential arguments to try and prove that the Bible conforms to science and to dig out charts that show the number of New Testament manuscripts compared to other ancient documents. Such arguments have their place, but remember that we are insisting that truth is based on God's revelation, not on our reason. So we still want to stick with Jesus here. What claims does he make about Scripture and what claims does Scripture make about itself?

In other words, we are going to say that you can trust the Bible because Jesus trusted it and claimed that it was authoritative and that the Bible itself claims to be God's authoritative and inspired word (2 Timothy 3:16). Now that sounds very much like a circular argument.

However, here's the thing. In the end, there has to be a final authority, something or someone that we rely upon to decide what is true and reliable. Here are the options:

- a. I can rely on someone or something else and trust them to be authoritative.
- b. I can rely on myself. I and I only will decide what is true and what is false.

In the first scenario, we tend to rely on the words of others, our parents, teachers, respected scientists, politicians (perhaps), celebrities (sadly so many people do on the big questions of identity and self worth). Of course, I expect there to be a track record there. I don't just take the word of someone who proves to be wrong nine times out of ten: trust grows, but at some point, there is a decision to rely on what they say.

In the second scenario, I am essentially saying that I cannot rely on what others say. I will only believe what I can see or reason for myself. As we have seen before, this is about the desire to be autonomous. It's what rationalism and empiricism are all about. We have also seen the futility of this. We each end up believing our own truth (pluralism) or discovering that there are so many important things that we just cannot know for certain.

The point is this. In each case, we have chosen to accept someone as an authority and, at some point, we take their word as truth because they say so.<sup>69</sup>

Now, when it comes to the Bible, we see two important things. First of all, Jesus said that not even the smallest letter would be wiped out from Scripture. He relied on it completely. He trusted it right down to the minutest detail. Secondly, as we have seen before, the Bible claims to be true, reliable and sufficient.

On this basis, we want to invite our questioner to start trusting the Bible's claims about itself and from there on about God, us and the World. Now, this is going to be a growing trust as they begin to see that the Bible is good, is reliable, is true. As they go along, here are four questions that they might want to keep thinking about.<sup>70</sup>

- i. Does what I read make sense of the World I know? In other words, does it make sense of what we know about history and society?
- ii. Does what I read make sense of the 'me' that I know? In other words, does it resonate with my experience of life?
- iii. Does what I read demonstrate that it is internally coherent? In other words, do the different parts of it agree or are there contradictions?
- iv. Is what I read liveable? Could I seriously put it into practice?

Note first of all the need for caution here. As we raise these questions, we are recognising that, because of the Fall, human reason is corrupted and that the human heart is deceitful. We are not simply saying "Do these things ring true to your fallen mind?" We are saying them in the context of the work of the Holy Spirit to convict people of truth.

Secondly, this means seriously brushing up on the evidence and taking time to know, for example, how different Christians answer the question of origins. It will also mean that we have taken time to search out the alleged controversies in the Bible and to have worked on these texts ourselves to understand why they are not contradictory. I am not attracted to the idea that we say to someone "Can you name any contradictions?" in the hope that they will say "no" and we can demonstrate that this is just hearsay. Even if it is just something they've heard second hand, we still want to deal with the real concern here. That may even mean saying "well I'm aware of a couple of places where people have thought there was a contradiction and it turned out that this wasn't the case. Can we look at one of those examples?"

### **Apologetics –the start of a conversation**

Now, at this point, you may be thinking "We've only started to scratch the surface and we've not answered these questions to my own satisfaction yet." There's a lot more that we could explore in each case, but at this stage, I just want to get the ball rolling and start us thinking about these things.

This also helps us to manage our expectations. It is going to be a rare situation where you respond to a person's question in ten minutes and they are satisfied, exclaiming in response "Now I believe."

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<sup>69</sup> For more on the circular argument issue see John M Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, (Phillipsburg, NJ.: P&R Publishing, 1994), 9-14.

<sup>70</sup>C.f. Gavin J McGrath, *A Confident Life in an age of change* (Leicester. IVP,1995), 86.

Rather, there's going to be an ongoing conversation, more questions and sub questions below the ones already asked to help clarify thinking.

The point is this: you have started the conversation. Better still, this is not now a mere conversation between you and them. This is a conversation where they are starting to listen to what God says. It will be the work of the Holy Spirit as he speaks through Scripture to bring about a change in their heart and mind (i.e. repentance).

## 12 Happy (Sorry! A postscript)

Co-incidentally at the same time that I was preparing the chapter on Apologetics, I was also teaching a couple of Apologetics sessions at OM Lifehope. One student asked “What do I do when someone’s objection is that they are already happy and contented in life?”

We talked through all the sorts of things you might expect such as “What is true happiness?” and “What happens when you lose the things that make you happy?” We also considered that the idea of losing the source(s) of happiness in their life may seem a remote possibility - especially for younger people.

So we then talked about what is “success” in Apologetics. If we think of apologetics as being primarily an intellectual argument then success will mean that we win the argument and the other person will acquiesce. But that’s not what Apologetics is all about. It’s a means of Gospel Proclamation. This means two things.

1. Our responsibility is to proclaim. It is the Holy Spirit who works in the hearer’s heart to produce conviction and repentance.
2. We trust God to work to his own timetable. Maybe they will not respond as we would like immediately but the word will take root and they will remember it at a future date. So with the person who says “I’m happy, I’m okay!” I might want to warn them about building on sand instead of the rock. Jesus warns that when the storm comes then the house on the sand will fall. We want our friends to get their life foundations sorted out now. However, it may not be until the day that the storm comes and sweeps away the sandy foundations that our friends realise “I was building on the wrong foundations but I remember a friend who told me about the right foundation.”



## 11 Expository Worship

In his book “Nine Marks of a Healthy Church,” Mark Dever makes Expository Preaching his first and most important mark of healthy church life.<sup>71</sup> I want to suggest that Dever is right to give expository preaching such a central position, but that he does not go far enough.

### Why is Expository Preaching so important?

Dever identifies nine marks that are associated with healthy church life. These are: Expository Preaching, Biblical Theology, The Gospel, a Biblical understanding of conversion, a Biblical understanding of evangelism, a Biblical understanding of church membership, Biblical church discipline, a concern for discipleship and growth and Biblical Church Leadership.<sup>72</sup> Dever says that

The first mark of a healthy church is expository preaching. It is not only the first mark; it is far and away the most important of them all, because if you get this right, all the others should follow.<sup>73</sup>

In fact, he claims,

This is so important that, if you miss this one and get all the other eight marks right, in a sense these others would be just so many accidents. You would have just happened to get them right. They may be discarded or distorted, because they didn't spring from the Word and their not continually being reshaped and refreshed by it. But if you get the priority of the Word established, then you have in place the single most important aspect of the church's life, and growing health is virtually assured, because God has decided to act by His Spirit through His Word.<sup>74</sup>

I agree with Dever. We have already seen that expository preaching follows naturally from our belief that God speaks to us through Scripture and that we are dependent upon God's special revelation in Scripture if we want to know the truth about God and His World. Dever distinguishes expository preaching from topical preaching where “the sermon begins with a particular matter that the preacher wants to preach about,”<sup>75</sup> rather than the sermon starting with “a particular text as its subject.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2004), 39.

<sup>72</sup> See contents page, Dever, *Nine Marks*.

<sup>73</sup> Dever, *Nine Marks*, 39.

<sup>74</sup> Dever, *Nine Marks*, 39.

<sup>75</sup> Dever, *Nine Marks*, 39.

<sup>76</sup> Dever, *Nine Marks*, 39.

As we have already seen, a commitment to teaching through particular books of the Bible, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, week after week sets the precedent that church life will be governed by God's Word and not the other way round. It will be tempting from time to time to feel pressurised into picking up a specific topic because of circumstances. For example, if funds are low, there may be pressure to preach on giving and when a series of outreach events are planned, we may be tempted to preach about the importance of evangelism. Yet, when we resist this temptation, we are saying that God will set the agenda and determine the priorities, not us and not our circumstances.

Dever identifies a further reason for expository preaching. He says.

Many pastors happily accept the authority of God's Word and profess to believe in the inerrancy of the Bible; yet if they do not in practice regularly preach expositionally, I'm convinced that they will never preach more than they knew when they began the whole exercise.<sup>77</sup>

In other words, the pastor himself becomes stunted in his spiritual growth because he never learns anything new from God; he simply raids the Bible for passages and verses which confirm what he already knows and believes. Not only that, but the church becomes stunted in its growth and is limited to knowing what the preacher already knew.

By the way, it may seem that this section is primarily aimed at preachers and pastors, but I think it is helpful for all church members. Whilst pastors and elders determine the preaching programme, they come under a lot of pressure from church members and other leaders about the shape of that programme.

Now, at this point, some may be tempted to object that we are putting the Bible and preaching on a pedestal and committing idolatry. Evangelical Christians and particularly conservative evangelicals are sometimes accused of something called Bibliolatry – making the Bible into a god, a fourth member of the Trinity if you like, that distracts worship away from Jesus.

I think this view is mistaken because it loses sight of how Scripture functions as revelation. The argument goes something along the lines of "Jesus is the Living Word and He is meant to be central, not the written word about him." The point is this. Jesus the Living Word is revealed to us through the Bible, the written word. Scripture is where God, the Holy Spirit speaks. The Holy Spirit reveals Christ to us. Where Scripture is genuinely opened, read and proclaimed, then Christ will be seen clearly, he will be at the centre. When Christ is not at the centre, then we are unlikely to be really reading and understanding Scripture properly.

If we are trying to make Jesus central without a commitment to expositional preaching, then we make Jesus in our own image. A few years ago, it was popular to wear little bracelets

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<sup>77</sup> Dever, *Nine Marks*, 41.

with the letters WWJD displayed on them. WWJD stood for “What would Jesus Do?” The wearer was meant to stop and ask at any point “What would Jesus do in this situation?” Here’s the problem with this. First of all, there was the risk that people began to try and imagine what Jesus would do in the situation rather than find out what he actually did do in such situations. Jesus was made in the image of the wearer as they superimposed their own priorities and prejudices onto him. Secondly, whilst “doing what Jesus would do” sounds like it is generally a good idea, a bit like motherhood and apple pie, it is not necessarily the right thing to do. For example, imagine you attend church on Sunday and a couple of the older ladies are selling jam to raise funds for a local charity. Do you:

- a. Buy the Jam?
- b. Have a chat with a church leader expressing concerns about the appropriateness of the sale during Sunday worship?
- c. Push the table over, smash the jam jars and drive the ladies out of the building denouncing them as thieves and robbers?

We know what Jesus did in a similar situation, but should we follow his example? It might not be that clear cut after all! Now that example may seem trivial and amusing and we may consider ourselves unlikely to fall for that trap, but what about this scenario? You notice as you sit at your desk that your colleagues carry the weight of the world on their shoulders. Looking around, you are filled with compassion as you see the burden of guilt and shame etched into their faces. Do you offer to take their guilt and shame onto yourself? Actually, whilst our minds are screaming out to us that we should not do this even though that’s exactly what Jesus did, it is what a lot of us do end up doing isn’t it? Yet, exactly because Jesus took our guilt on himself, we are not meant to do what he did. When we do, it crushes and breaks us.

So, making Christ central is not simply a matter of doing what Jesus would do. We need a complete picture of who Jesus is, what he has done for us and what he calls us to do and that’s exactly why we need to make the exposition of Scripture central to church life.

### **The Apologetics of Expository Preaching**

One of the great things about expository preaching is that, over time, people grow an appetite for it. They become excited about the transforming power of God’s Word in their lives. However, committing to this model as preachers and congregations isn’t an easy walk in the park. It takes time and patience. The benefits may not seem to be instantly visible. In some respects, it’s a bit like trying to encourage people to eat healthy food. Over time, they will discover the benefits of a good diet including fresh fruit and vegetables. They’ll also discover that good food tastes good. However, for some time, there will be the pull of junk food. Junk food is addictive: it’s designed to be! If someone is offering junk food round the corner, then we’ll be lured away from the healthy food.

This means that when we commit to expository teaching in church life, then there will be objections. Whenever we preach, then the listeners come with a whole host of objections and reasons as to why they should not listen and engage. To make matters more complicated, these objections often go unstated. Among such objections I would include the following.

1. I don't believe that what you have to say is true:
  - a. Because I don't believe that there is a God, or, if there is a God, it is unlikely that He is interested in us or is speaking to us (atheism and deism)
  - b. Because I believe in a different god/gods to yours. This may include a god that sounds similar to yours but is marked as different because he/she/it is associated with a different 'gospel' –a different story of salvation and restoration
2. I don't believe that what you have to say is relevant – or at least to me
3. I believe that what you say will in a sense be true in that it will describe something about the problem of the human condition, but the solution you offer will not be liveable
4. I am sure that what you have to say will be relevant and interesting, but I simply don't have time to listen to it as I am too busy. This may include those who are uncertain that systematic expository preaching and teaching is right. They see themselves as in a hurry; they want you to answer big questions quickly. By quickly, I mean that they want you to get to the point quickly in your sermon (tell me the answer in 5 minutes: why spend 30 minutes on a text?) and also that they want you to do it in a preaching series. In other words, why spend six months, a year or longer working steadily through a book of the Bible, verse by verse, chapter by chapter instead of looking at a different topic each week?
5. I know that what you have to say is important, but I don't think that I will be able to understand it. Listening, thinking and engaging will be so hard that I will not enjoy it. This may well be expressed on behalf of others –e.g. "how will visitors cope?" or "this is too much for the young people...."

This means that when we engage in expository teaching, there's also some apologetics to be done as well. How will we counter these objections –especially when they are often assumed rather than stated? Well, here are some thoughts.

First of all, it will be appropriate from time to time to state and make explicit what is assumed. We will acknowledge that the objection exists and we will respond to it. Secondly, we will want to think carefully about our sermon introductions: do they encourage people to engage with Scripture? Are the listeners drawn in? Do we start with questions, comments and stories that highlight the relevance of the text we are about to look at? Thirdly, do we answer what Chris Green calls "the so what?" questions. Do people see as we work through the text why it is relevant and how they have come to words of life?

Fourthly, do we model obedience to God's Word and a love for God's Word in our own lives? This means that we will show that we are sitting under God's Word, including when we are not preaching or teaching ourselves. It also means that people will see us responding when Scripture challenges and disagrees with us. We will be doers of God's Word, not just hearers.

Now, the responsibility for this falls not just on the preacher. For example, do those who lead worship show a concern for giving Scripture and preaching their rightful place in our meetings? Are children's workers modelling expository teaching in their own groups? Not only that, but do they too demonstrate a love for sitting under the teaching of God's Word? Or are they content to escape from the sermon to the children's group? Are they simply working through a Sunday School syllabus on a cycle or is there the sense that when they teach, they are growing in their own knowledge of God and His Word?

### **More than Just Expository Preaching**

This brings us back to our original statement that Dever is both right in his observation and failing to go far enough. Here's the problem with talking about expository preaching. It can give the impression that the responsibility for declaring and expounding God's Word lies solely with the preacher standing in the pulpit. But, I want to suggest that the whole of our life of worship should be expositional.

First of all, this means that in a Worship Service, the person leading will want to ensure that exposition of Scripture is given its due place. They do this through the careful choice of songs, comments, prayers, liturgy etc. They do this by seeking to ensure that the other elements of a service compliment rather than detract from the preaching of God's Word. This will require them to both spend time reading and engaging with the chosen passage of Scripture themselves and by talking through the message with the preacher.

Secondly, the teaching programme for children and young people should be expositional too. Children and youth workers should learn to expound Scripture, not simply to wander from topic to topic.

Thirdly, the different outreach activities of a church should be Word-centred. We increasingly seek to ensure that when a new activity is started that those who come understand that engagement with God's Word will be at the heart of it. This does not mean that there will always be a central teaching slot, but it does mean that through advice and conversation, God's Word will be communicated. Note here that this is another problem with making expositional preaching the mark. We are still being expositional when we sit down and have a discussion one to one and in groups.

Fourthly, it means that the advice and counsel we give and the decisions we make will be scripturally driven. We have already seen this when we have looked at pastoral care and apologetics. Of course, worship applies to the whole of our lives and so Christians should be

learning to see how Scripture governs all of their decisions in church, in the family and in the workplace.

## 12 Making Expository Worship Happen

How can we encourage an appetite for Expository Worship? Here are a few more thoughts.

1. Get people to look at what they are singing. For example, before you sing a hymn, ask people to look at a verse – what stands out to them? Are there lines they like? Where are we getting this from in Scripture? Why not pick up on one line of a song?

For example, at Bearwood Chapel, we recently learnt the Sovereign Grace Song "Jesus Thank you (The Mystery of the Cross). I got some questions back about one line in the song which goes "You the perfect Holy One crushed your Son." Should this line be in the song? Does it make God the Father sound harsh and cruel? Does it suggest that the Son is a helpless victim of "cosmic child abuse"? How will actual victims of abuse react to it? I realised that it would be helpful to have some teaching picking up on this issue. So I set aside some time at our Sunday evening communion to look at the idea of Penal Substitution.

Now, to teach on this, I could go straight into Isaiah 53:10 which says "Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him" or I could start with the line in the song and ask people how they react to it. This may get a more honest reaction than going straight in with the Scripture. Once they hear something in Scripture they are almost programmed to give the right answers. But the words of the song and the Scripture they are based on are unsettling. We feel uncomfortable because we want to protect God from accusation and so we can end up placing the Father at a distance from the Cross and simply talk about what sinful men did to Jesus. We rightly acknowledge this and we rightly emphasise that Jesus as eternal God willingly went to the Cross, but we should not lose sight of the fact that the Father is active – that God's wrath is turned away and that death is punishment for sin, not just a consequence.

2. Different congregations will react differently to expository preaching based on their experience. We still need to help encourage and develop an appetite for and desire to learn how to engage with Scripture, even with those who are used to expository preaching – maybe even more so with them. That's why sometimes it is good to stop and ask the questions and look for an audible response. This may be risky in a church where the congregation are used to expository preaching, but not used to interaction. Our Sunday evening congregation will be used to interaction and to asking and answering questions, so I am willing sometimes to go in without a set talk and just have just one or two questions to open things up. I will, of course, have done lots of work on the text and have my notes available. In fact, something like this may require more preparatory work than a set talk. But if a congregation are not used to this, then be ready for a bit of silence where maybe only one or two people will dare to speak, so have your normal talk ready to continue with.

3. Build the whole service as "an exposition" – this may mean having responsibility for the whole meeting including choosing songs etc. or it may mean that you plan it as a team. For example, at our 9:30 service recently, we were looking at the passage where Jesus is accused of eating with sinners. The whole service became about "a meal with Jesus." We had breakfast during – not before – the meeting and we sat round a table together. We introduced the theme and sang a couple of songs at the table and then we looked at the children's talk (we'd talked this through in advance and seen a close link with the main talk). My talk was interspersed through the service. We had communion in the middle of this and then prayer and some songs. At the end of the service, I made my conclusion.

4. When you are planning what you preach, you will be thinking through about what your talk says to specific circumstances. So follow up with your pastoral care. When you are talking with someone, remind them about what was preached on recently and help them to draw the connections to their own life.

5. If others are leading the meeting, try and send them a copy of your notes in advance. Even draw them and others into your thinking. Send out an email saying "I was looking at the passage for Sunday and I had this question – what do you think?" Don't be disappointed if you don't get a response. People may be nervous about responding, but it will still get them thinking.

6. If you have half a mind to it, why not try writing a song yourself based around the Bible passage and talk? At worst it's a useful thought exercise and may help you get a different perspective on the teaching (maybe drawing on emotion as well as intellect): at best, you may end up writing something that can be used in corporate worship.



### 13 “Crushed” (Expository Worship a worked example)

I mentioned in the last chapter about a song that we had started to sing at Bearwood Chapel. The song is called “Jesus Thank you (The Mystery of the Cross).” In the first verse, you have the line “You the perfect Holy One crushed your Son.” Some people have expressed discomfort at singing this line, so we took time out one Sunday evening to look at it.

This is because it is right to stop and question lyrics to make sure we know what we are singing and that we should be singing it. In this case I admitted that the words caused me some discomfort too. However, the crucial point is that they are following Isaiah 53:10 very closely. So I need to give serious attention to that. This requires us to work through the theology and the pastoral application a little.

1. We don't want people to think of Christ's substitution as being "cosmic child abuse" as it has sadly been distorted as being by some. When people talk about God punishing Jesus, it can sound like that. So I tend, when describing Penal Substitution, to start by focusing on Jesus willingly going to the cross and saying that he bore the penalty of sin. To do this, we will go to Scripture that emphasises this (e.g. John 10:17-18).

2. However, I can be so keen to emphasise this point that I can end up losing the other part of what happened. Reading "It was the Lord's Plan to crush him" forcibly reminds me of the Father's very active involvement in this. It also points me to 2 Cor 5:21 where God makes the one who was without sin become sin for us. Then, in Romans 3:25, we read that God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin (NLT) or "propitiation" (ESV).

This brings me up sharp. I cannot stick with the passive "Christ was crushed" or "Jesus was punished." The passive voice still implies that someone was actively doing something. In Scripture, it usually points to something that God is doing. So I need to face up to my discomfort here. Remember how we have talked about the need to allow Scripture to disagree with us? These Scriptures bring into sharp focus the Father's active involvement. People want to keep him at a distance so his hands are clean. They can cope with the Father and the Son agreeing the plan and then the Father permitting Jesus to go to the cross. In this view, Jesus on the cross sucks up all the power and effect of evil onto himself (this is Steve Chalke's understanding of the Cross). So then, Jesus is crushed by wicked people. But the Bible is clear that death is the punishment, not just the consequence, of sin that God actively delivers. The Father, unlike Pilate, does not attempt to wash his hands of the whole thing.

So where does that leave us pastorally?

1. We're starting to say that some of our songs may challenge us. Some of us may not even be able to sing them yet. They take us to Scriptures which force us to confront the true awfulness of sin. We thought we had grasped the full cost of Calvary, but we look again and see that it cost God even more than we had already grasped. I think that's why this song starts by talking about "The mystery of the cross, I cannot comprehend..."

2. We want to make sure that what we sing is balanced and reflects the whole counsel of God. So what I do at this stage is look and see whether the song itself gives the broader picture. I believe it does and having lyrics addressed to the Father and the Son help with this. I also would look at the songs chosen around it. We will sing "Worthy is the Lamb" which points to the high and exalted Jesus. He is not just some helpless victim. For more on planning a service that ensures the songs chosen balance each other, see Bob Kauflin's excellent book "Worship Matters."

3. We need to work hard at explaining things clearly and gently. There's so much room for misunderstanding here. We don't want the congregation to be crushed by our own careless handling of God's Word. I realised after the study in conversation with others that there was still a lot of work to do. We could not duck the fact that the "crushed" imagery is there in Scripture and that God the Father is active in this but:

a. We want to be very, very clear that the imagery here is not in any way meant to make us think of a cruel God or even a frustrated God who turns on his Son maliciously and acts to cause him physical pain. In fact, I would suggest that the crushing imagery is more to do with the sense that the Son bears the penalty of sin.

b. We keep emphasising that the oneness of God. This means it is not about one stronger person turning on the weaker and abusing them. It is about the Father and the Son being united in will before the creation of the World. It's about something that the Son is able to do. It's not about the destruction of the Son. It is as we have seen above about something that works for the Son's glory not just our salvation.

c. At the same time we must not lose sight of the three persons in the Trinity. We should not talk in a way that leads to modalism. The Father and the Son are one God, but distinct persons when it comes to what happens on the Cross.

d. We need to keep coming back to the goodness of God.

4. I want to come to something important about the victims of abuse here. The Bible does speak to them so lovingly and gently. I think 1 Peter is very relevant to this and it puts Isaiah 53 and the Cross centrally. Now, they are going to need some walking with for this. But what we will do is find the right people to sit down with them and gently work through Scripture with them. We may even find that, handled correctly, we give people permission to open up about the hurt and the secrets that they are carrying.

5. We need to be teaching on these tough things. Partly that will come from the worship leader stopping to explain a song choice. We might want to use the Isaiah reading. We might want to say something like "This song reminds us that Jesus willingly bore the penalty for our sin. Where we deserved for God to crush us, Jesus took our place. We cannot underestimate the cost of the Cross." (I may even then link this song with the words of "Oh to See the Dawn," especially "What a love, what a cost, we stand forgiven at the Cross.")

## 14 Pulling things together

Right at the start, we said that this would be a blog for people with messy lives. In other words, this is meant to be a practical blog helping us to think about how we live as believers. So it still may seem a little strange to think that we've spent so much time talking about doctrine and revelation. And yet, hopefully we've begun to see that this is not a mere intellectual exercise. What we believe affects how we live and we've started to see some of those practical implications.

In summary, our beliefs have to come from somewhere. In fact, there are four different places where we get our beliefs from.

**Tradition:** This is received wisdom. Some beliefs are passed down to us as truth. Tradition might suggest a long history of ideas passed down through the generations and sometimes this will be the case. However, I also like to talk about things received from parents and grandparents as tradition.

**Culture & Community:** This includes common sense: things generally considered to be true and wise. It also includes peer pressure. There are things we choose to believe, or to act upon as true because we want to fit in with others around us.

**Reason:** As we try to figure things out and understand our own experiences, we will use reason to interpret what is happening. By the way, our reasoning may be wrong if it's based on faulty logic or if there are gaps in our knowledge.

**Revelation:** We have seen over the past few weeks that this is the only sure basis of truth. We can only truly know because God reveals truth to us. God's truth is revealed to us clearly and with authority in the Bible.

We have seen that if we believe that God reveals truth to us – truth about Himself, creation, us and the future – then this will affect how we approach counselling, worship, teaching, evangelism and apologetics. If we believe that we know truth through revelation then in each of these things, we will want to ensure that God's Word is prominent. We will want to avoid attempting to make things up for ourselves. By the way, this is liberating. A huge weight of responsibility is lifted from our shoulders. We are not expected to come up with all the answers ourselves. We simply take people to the one who has the answers.

After Christmas, we will start to look in more detail at what truth God's Word reveals to us. We will start by discovering what Scripture tells us about who God is and we will see how what we believe about God affects how we live and how we worship.

## Appendix 1: The Bible Tell Me So (Book Review)

Everyone likes a good story, including God! This is the premise of Peter Enns book “The Bible tells me so.”<sup>78</sup> Enns believes that “Defending Scripture has made us unable to read it.”<sup>79</sup> Essentially God and his book the Bible have been badly misunderstood with dire consequences.

Enns’ argument is that we need to read the bible as an ancient text. It’s full of stories. We should not attempt to force these stories or “myths” into a modernist understanding of historical accuracy. In fact many of these stories are completely made up and God is pretty much okay with that. In this way, Enns offers a neat solution for those who find the Bible a troubling book. Take for example the story of Creation and the Fall with “a talking serpent” and “magical trees”,<sup>80</sup> this is a myth designed to help the people of Israel make sense of their political and social situation at a much later date in history.<sup>81</sup>

What about the Canaanites? Did God encourage genocide when they he ordered the Israelites to wipe them out? Enns summarises each of the usual attempts at solutions to this problem before quickly dismissing them out of hand. For example, that wickedness including child sacrifice and that their punishment points forward to the final day of judgement when God will punish all evil.<sup>82</sup>

He then offers his own solution. The Canaanites were simply the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time.<sup>83</sup> This is one of his examples of God’s ancient people telling an even older story to help explain their own political circumstances.<sup>84</sup> More than that: it’s not that God told the people to wipe out the Canaanites because they were in the wrong place. God never told the Israelites to wipe them out<sup>85</sup> and what is more they never actually tried to do it in practice either.<sup>86</sup> This is simply a story to show that the Israelite God Yahweh is the greatest in much the same way that a boy in the playground will declare that “my dad can beat your dad.”<sup>87</sup>

The historical Jesus is still there in Enns’ version of events –well more or less.<sup>88</sup> The gospel writers took their own liberties with the account, including the Virgin Birth and visitors from the East.<sup>89</sup> However, Jesus really did die on the Cross and he really did rise again<sup>90</sup> (here Enns follows NT Wright’s argument that the resurrection was such a surprise, going against popular and learned expectation so that no Jew could have just made it up<sup>196-223</sup><sup>91</sup>).

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<sup>78</sup> Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So: Why defending Scripture has made us unable to read it* (New York, NY.: Harper One, 2014).

<sup>79</sup> Longer Title on Front cover, see also Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 4.

<sup>80</sup> Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 4.

<sup>81</sup> See Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 113-114.

<sup>82</sup> Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 33-57.

<sup>83</sup> Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 49.

<sup>84</sup> See Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 54-72.

<sup>85</sup> Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 54.

<sup>86</sup> Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 58.

<sup>87</sup> Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 61-65.

<sup>88</sup> See Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 73-94 and 167-192.

<sup>89</sup> Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 82-86.

<sup>90</sup> Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 196.

<sup>91</sup> See Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 196-223. See also NT Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London, SPCK, 2003).

Enns believes that his approach enables us to read the bible properly and take it seriously. It still is God's Word but we should not expect it to conform to our expectations of how it should behave.<sup>92</sup>

And here's the thing Enns is being consistent. What he believes about the Bible affects how he lives or specifically how he writes and teaches (which is about how he lives given that this teaching and writing are his day job). If God speaks to us through stories that others have created about him, selectively shaping their accounts, choosing to omit or include in order to make a point that will affect our approach to preaching and teaching. So Enns gives us a book full of stories, stories about himself, stories about the Bible and how it came to us. It will not surprise us then to find out that Enns also selectively shapes his text.

Let me give you an example. We've seen that Enns' argues that the Israelites never really tried to wipe out the Canaanites. His basis for arguing this is that he claims there is no archaeological evidence for a mass invasion of Canaan by the Israelites during the time of Joshua.<sup>93</sup> Now there's a useful corrective here. Some people talk as though all the archaeological evidence is neatly in place without question or challenge but that's not the case. Archaeologists and historians argue about the evidence and what it tells them about the time when the Bible was written (just as they do about other ancient events). They debate the dating of findings, they debate what those findings tell them and they debate the significance of the findings. Life might be more simple if they didn't do this but they do.

But to announce that there's no archaeological support for the invasion of Canaan and the destruction of the cities including Jericho? Well that's to go to the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of omitting a significant portion of the story. It won't take the reader too long to find out that Enns is being very liberal with the truth. A quick Wikipedia search will tell you about what archaeologists have found at Jericho.<sup>94</sup> Some believe very strongly that they've found evidence of Joshua's attack, others disagree but the evidence is not missing, it's just debated.

In fact, this point is so glaringly obvious that one half wonders if it's intended as one of those little signals to the reader that Enns claims to spot in the Bible!

And here is the problem with "The Bible Tells Me So" It has been so selective in its story telling that it hides from the reader the possibility of real, searching, rich, deep engagement with God's Word.

Let's come back to that Canaanite example. Take these two quotes from Enns.

"Israel can in principle co-exist with other nations`-as long as everyone behaves and keeps their distance. But you can't have God's people sharing living space and intermingling with unclean pagans."<sup>95</sup>

And

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<sup>92</sup> Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 231-232.

<sup>93</sup> Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 58-60.

<sup>94</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jericho>. The challenge here is two ways. First of all, historians disagree over the dating of the archaeological evidence of destruction, secondly they disagree over the dating of the Exodus. So, if the Exodus was at the later end of the spectrum and the destruction of Jericho's walls at the early end then we have a problem but if the date of the walls falling is at the late end of the scale or the Exodus is placed earlier then we don't have a problem.

<sup>95</sup> Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 49.

“To sum up: Why did God single out the Canaanites for extermination? The factor that distinguished the Canaanites from everyone else, the reason they ‘deserved’ to be exterminated wasn’t their immorality, but the fact that they (like everyone else) were an immoral people who occupied the land God promised to the Israelites. To leave any Canaanites alive would (1) contaminate the land and (2) threaten Israel’s devotion to their God.”<sup>96</sup>

Here, he stumbles almost by accident on something incredibly poignant. The issue that God and Israel have with the Canaanites is their location in the land promised to Israel. God’s concern is for the distinctiveness of his people as seen in all those detailed laws about cleanness and holiness. For some reason, there’s a risk that the Canaanites will compromise this.

Here in Embryonic form we have a powerful message but Enns misses it. He is so keen to rush on to argue his own message that these things never happened. Enns is working as an Old Testament scholar. This is one of the important disciplines in theological study but a good Old Testament Scholar will bring into play too other vital disciplines including Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology. The aim of these two disciplines is to help us step back and see the bigger picture of what God is saying and doing. These disciplines help us to see how themes link together and how the picture of revelation builds up over time. They help us to wrestle with the text, think clearly, make careful distinctions and come to appropriate practical application.

With those disciplines in place we have the makings of a very interesting discussion and perhaps a much more fascinating book. What does it mean to say that the Canaanites were the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time? Why is it that the Israelites were allowed to engage with some people groups by making treaties, trading and even intermarrying and not with others (this seems to be much more than an ethnic, tribal thing)? Why will the prophets look forward to a day when people from many nations will not just come but be actively welcomed in the land and even at the Temple?

Well, this is just a little review so I’m going to leave you with these questions rather than try to answer them all now. But this is where those other disciplines will help. People like Chris Wright will help you think about the important relationship between God, the People and the Land. He will offer a paradigm that will get you thinking both about theology and ethics. Systematic Theologians will get you thinking about what these events tell us about god’s character and what it means for him to say “Be Holy as I am Holy” Our own little paradigm will help us to think through what we can see about God, Creation, Us and New Creation in these events.

Oh and one more thing. As you wrestle with these questions why not entertain the possibility that God really did say the things we find him saying in the Bible and that the events we are told about really did happen. What might happen if you do that? Well two things. First of all, we will stop trying to control the bible by making it into an ancient book malleable and subordinate to 21<sup>st</sup> Century thinking. Secondly by hearing it as God’s timeless Word, we will allow it to do what it should do if it genuinely is God’s word to disagree with us.

## **Appendix 2: How to listen to evangelistic sermons (If you are already a Christian)**

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<sup>96</sup> Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 53.

At any one time in a gathering there will be Christians and non-Christians present. This presents the preacher with a challenge. Does he primarily focus on preaching to the Christians to edify and build them up or does he focus on evangelising the enquirers. Either way, he risks leaving part of the audience behind. Or does he? One helpful way of approaching the sermon is to preach at one type of listener but with the expectation that the others present will in effect be able to overhear and by analogy apply the sermon to themselves. So if my main application is for Christians, the non-Christian should be able to trace the Gospel through what I say. Likewise, there should be something for even mature believers in an evangelistic talk. So, if I'm the believer in the congregation, how should I listen to an evangelistic sermon?

### **1. Listen Prayerfully**

There will be non-Christians in the congregation. It may well be that I have invited some of them along. Certainly there should be people I am actively getting to know and befriend amongst the audience. So when I hear a Gospel message, it should encourage me to pray for them as they listen that God's Word will take root in their hearts.

I will also be listening out both for what is being said and what isn't being said so that in conversation afterwards, I'm ready to follow up with my friends, to reinforce the points made and where necessary to fill in the gaps. I will be thinking about the specific context and outlook of the friend I will be talking to. I may also be convicted about people who are not there. You know that feeling "I wish so and so had been here to hear this." Well this should move me to pray for them, for opportunities to speak with them and tell them about what I've heard and to invite them along to future events.

### **2. Listen Thankfully**

It should warm my heart to hear the Gospel preach. I should never grow tired of this. There will be the sense that "the old tunes are the best." I will be reminded of what Christ has done for me. Preaching the Gospel and Listening to the Gospel is first and foremost an act of worship. We are praising God. Gospel messages will give us a deeper insight into the character of God and the work of Christ.<sup>97</sup>

### **3. Listen Repentantly**

The Gospel is the answer to how to live as Christians now. There are two aspects to this. As I am reminded of what Christ has done for me, I will be challenged about how I am going on and growing as a Christian. Justification spurs us on to Sanctification.

Secondly, when I am convicted of sin and failing in my life, then it's not additional rules or self-help steps that I need. I need God's Grace. I need the Gospel to be applied again.<sup>98</sup>

### **4. Listen Teachably**

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<sup>97</sup> This is essentially what John Piper does in his book *Desiring God*

<sup>98</sup> On this, see Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace*, NavPress (2006)

One of the reasons why I preach evangelistic sermons is to help Christians see evangelism and apologetics modelled. For the same reason, I listen to talks and read books designed primarily for enquirers.<sup>99</sup>

So when I listen to an evangelistic sermon, I am looking to see how the preacher models presenting the Gospel. That way, I can learn for when I'm in a position to share my faith one to one and in small groups. Although the preacher is usually not in direct dialogue with people asking questions and responding, a good evangelist will be anticipating and responding to the questions that unbelievers will have. So I can learn how to respond sensitively to questions and objections. I can learn how to avoid red herrings. I can see how the preacher takes the listener directly to Jesus. I will learn both from what they do well and also from what they don't do well (because no preacher will be perfect). So sometimes I will think "I want to try and do it like that" whilst at other times I will think "I would have dealt with that differently." You may want to find an opportunity later on to talk to the preacher about his sermon so you can learn more (though in the immediate aftermath, both his focus and yours should normally be on responding to enquirers).

Good teaching and learning involves opportunities to put into practice what we have learnt. So actively seek them out. When you are at work on Monday morning and a colleague asks you at tea break "What did you do at the weekend." You have a great opportunity to say "I heard a really helpful talk. I think you would have found it helpful too..."

We come to faith through the preaching of the Gospel, but we also stay, go on and grow through the preaching of the Gospel. This means that even an evangelistic talk is for our encouragement, edification and correction. Enjoy listening.

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<sup>99</sup> Good places to start for this include: Timothy Keller, *The Reason For God*, C.S Lewis, *Mere Christianity* and Barry Cooper & Paul Williams, *If You Could Ask God One Question*.



## If Context is King, Then Contextualisation Is....?

Today (June 10<sup>th</sup> 2015), I had the privilege of learning with and from other church leaders and planters about sharing God's good news in different cultural contexts. Here are some notes and reflections.

Much of the discussion was based on the section on "contextualisation" in Tim Keller's excellent - book "Center Church."<sup>100</sup> Keller says that "contextualisation is not – as is often argued – 'giving people what they want to hear.' Rather, it is giving people the Bible's answers, which they may not want to hear, to questions about life that people in their particular time and place are asking, in language and forms they can comprehend and through appeals and arguments with force they can feel, even if they reject them."<sup>101</sup>

I guess, put simpler you could say "when we proclaim the Gospel, we always do so in a context." People live in historical, social and economic contexts. One person likened this to goldfish swimming in a bowl of water. The bowl of water is the context and whilst we may see it from the outside, the goldfish itself may not even be aware or perceive the context (water).

Keller talks about the importance of preaching in a relevant way. He refers to John Stott's "Between Worlds" which talks about "building a bridge from the Scriptures to the contemporary world." Well, Stott's point is helpful; we've all sat through dry, boring, theoretical lectures and thought "so what?" However, with great caution, I want to challenge Stott's analogy here (or at least how it could be heard). The risk here is that we begin as preachers, teachers and evangelists to admire our great skill at bridge building. We see Gospel proclamation as this great art of taking Scripture and making it relevant. We talk about bringing God's Word to life. We think of application as being us taking the theory of what Scripture says and means and determining what people should do about it. But Scripture is already relevant. Now of course it is written in specific contexts and the language, technology, fashions and some of the detailed issues may differ across the centuries but Scripture also has the great ability to speak across cultures.

Let me give two examples. First of all, two weeks ago, I was preaching at our Spanish speaking congregation, Nueva Vida (with the help of a translator). We turned to Titus 1 and right at the start, I said that the pastoral letters were written by Paul to young leaders of young churches. Immediately we could see the relevance to a new congregation with emerging leaders. Secondly, our Home Group has been working through 1 Corinthians. We've learnt about rivalry, self-importance, sexual sin etc. At times we have felt as though Paul could so easily have been writing about 21<sup>st</sup> Century Birmingham and Sandwell.

It's not that we have to build a bridge from Scripture to the world to make Scripture relevant to our culture. Rather, we invite people to come with us to Scripture and discover that it already is relevant. Now that actually makes those irrelevant sermons even worse. It's not that the preacher

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<sup>100</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, Michigan. Zondervan, 2012).

<sup>101</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 89.

has failed to make something relevant that was not yet relevant. Rather, it's that he has taken something that was relevant, clear and powerful and made it irrelevant and confusing.

One of the things Keller talks about is being able to "affirm the beliefs of a culture wherever it can be done with integrity."<sup>102</sup> He identifies two types of belief.

"The first are what I call 'A beliefs, which are beliefs people already hold that because of God's common grace roughly correspond to some part of Biblical teaching. Because of their 'A beliefs' people are predisposed to find plausible some of the Bible's teaching (which we may call 'A Doctrines'). However, we will also find 'B' beliefs – what may be called 'defeater' beliefs – beliefs of the culture that lead listeners to find some Christian doctrines implausible or overtly offensive. 'B' doctrines contradict Christian truth directly at points we may call 'B' doctrines."<sup>103</sup>

To help illustrate this, Keller gives this example:

"In Manhattan, what the Bible says about turning the other cheek is welcome (an 'A belief), but what it says about sexuality is resisted (a 'Be' belief). In the Middle East, we see the opposite – turning the other cheek seems unjust and impractical but biblical prohibitions on sexuality make sense."<sup>104</sup>

Keller then uses the illustration of stones (the 'B' beliefs) which sink in water and using a raft (made up of 'A' beliefs) to float the stones.<sup>105</sup> In our seminar, the leader created a physical illustration of this with a bowl of water and a pencil raft. Unfortunately he also overloaded his raft with too many stones so it capsized!

Now I don't want to disagree with Tim Keller especially having already taken on John Stott. However, I do have some questions about this. Mind you, my issue is probably more with the presentation in Center Church because I'm sure I've heard a more detailed and nuanced explanation of it elsewhere.

Essentially, Keller is presenting a version of what Hendrik Cramer would call Subversive Fulfillment and what missiologists like JH Bavinck would refer to as points of contact. Kramer would say that we show how those "A beliefs" are fulfilled in the Gospel. However, you also need the subversive element too. What this means is that whilst Common Grace and General Revelation give all cultures access to some truth, that truth isn't fully formed. Rather, sin and idolatry means that even the truth we have is fragmented and distorted. So someone may say that "God is holy." But do they fully and correctly understand what "holiness means? They may like the idea that "God is love" but, if their understanding of love is shaped by western images of romance and fickle hearts rather than by faithfulness then how much use is that?

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<sup>102</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 123.

<sup>103</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 123.

<sup>104</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 123.

<sup>105</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 124.

Because of that, I would suggest (and I have a feeling that Keller may do elsewhere) that what we need to do is not so much choose a set of "A" beliefs on which to float a random set of "B" beliefs. Rather, we carefully choose a specific "B" belief to show that they haven't fully grasped the "A" belief. This is what we do with the Doctrine of the Trinity. To a Muslim this is a "B" belief. We take the A Belief that God is Almighty and we talk about the implications of this, that he is sovereign, eternal, unchanging but we note that there's a problem. Creation must mean that somehow God changed because he began to relate to creation. It suggests that far from being sovereign, God needed his creation. We need the "B" belief that God is Trinity, so that there has been an eternal relationship to properly understand his unchanging nature. It is only then that we can say something that the Muslim might like to believe in his heart but cannot consistently believe I his head (we might define this as a "C" belief) that God is love.