

Editorial – What Do I Believe About the Bible

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Not far from where we live is a thriving evangelical church, with a large board outside which states: “We are a Bible-believing church”. I feel like daubing over the board the words: “And I am a Jesus-believing Christian”.

Surely it is our faith in Jesus which counts – not our theories of inspiration! The Apostle Paul, for instance, did not preach the Bible – he preached Christ crucified and risen. It is through faith in Jesus Christ that we are put right with God. The Scriptures call me to put my trust in Jesus – they do not call me to put my trust in Scripture. This does not mean that I do not believe the Bible to be the inspired Word of God. Far from it! I have spent a life-time preaching and teaching the Scriptures. I begin every day reading the Scriptures for my own personal edification and guidance. However, whereas I worship the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, I do not worship the Scriptures.

So what do I believe about the Bible?

The living oracles of God

On 2 June 1963, at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, a Bible was given to the new sovereign: “We present you with this book”, declared the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, “the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is wisdom, this is the Royal Law: these are the lively oracles of God”. That last phrase is a quotation from the Authorised Version and was used by Stephen in his defence before the Sanhedrin to describe the 10 Commandments, if not the Torah as a whole (Acts 7.38). What later versions call “the living oracles of God” (RSV; NRSV), “the living utterances of God” (REB) or “God’s living messages” (GNB), has been surely rightly applied to Scripture as a whole. God’s Word is ‘living’ – in the sense that it is ‘life-giving’ and ‘life-determining’. Tom Torrance, Scotland’s greatest theologian of the 20th century, wrote: “It was through the word of God that the world came into being; it was through that word incarnate in Jesus Christ that the powers of darkness were vanquished and the barriers of the grave torn away; and it will be through that same word, read and hard in the Holy Scriptures and ministered faithfully, that Jesus Christ, clothed with the same Spirit by

whose power he rose again from the dead, will surely transform our life and society.”

As the Scriptures are read and expounded, God’s word comes alive to us. God has not just spoken – he continues to speak. J B Philipps described his experience of translating the Scriptures as being like an electrician re-wiring an ancient house without being able to “turn the mains off”.

The inspired Word of God

Writing to Timothy, Paul described the Scriptures as “inspired” (2 Tim 3.16) – literally “God-breathed”. Although Paul had in mind the Old Testament scriptures – the New Testament had yet to come into being – nonetheless we can apply this expression to the Bible as a whole.

Paul here is using a term which was familiar in the ancient world. In essence, he declares that God speaks through the words of Scripture. In the words of Thomas Oden, an American theologian and author of the ‘Interpretation Commentary’, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*: “As our breath is in our language and mixes with our words, so does the breath of the Spirit enter into the language of Scripture and enable its very words to be means of grace. When we say God breathes or God writes or God speaks, we are speaking metaphorically, but confidently, of the way the heart of God becomes for us thoughts expressed in words”

Paul, however, is not enunciating a particular theory of the inspiration of Scripture. It is clear that he believed that God was active in the composition of Scripture. The Evangelical New Testament scholar, Howard Marshall, in his book, *Biblical Interpretation*, expressed it in this way: “Just as in the case of the creation and preservation of the universe we can observe points where God intervened in unusual ways for specific purposes, so too we can say that alongside and within this general concursive action of the Spirit in inspiring normal human forms of composition in the biblical books, we can trace special actions of the Spirit in bringing special revelation”.

God’s Word came through men and women

Unlike the *Book of Mormon*, the Word of God did not fall from heaven. In the words of 2 Pet 1.27 NRSV: “Men and women moved

by the Holy Spirit spoke from God”. God did not literally push the pen as the prophet or apostle wrote. God did not use the prophets and the apostles as we might use the keyboard of a computer. Time and again, the Bible bears eloquent testimony to the fact that God spoke through people’s personalities as also through the very individual pattern in which he arranged their lives. We only have to think of Jeremiah and Hosea to see how much their experience and their message were bound together. Nor is it without significance that we have four Gospels and not just one – the very differences between them indicate differences of perspective and context.

I believe that Evangelicals need to be more aware of the human dimension of the Bible. One of the challenges of theology is to wrestle with the divine-human tension of Scripture. In some ways, this tension is akin to the divine-human tension in the person of Jesus: just as Jesus was the Word made flesh, so Scripture is the Word enlettered. This tension present which can never be satisfactorily resolved. Just as heresy emerges if we emphasise the divinity of the person of Jesus over against his humanity, we likewise fall into error if we emphasise the divinity of Scripture over against its humanity. The late John Stott, writing in *The Contemporary Christian*, put it this way: “Its double authorship demands a double approach. Because Scripture is the Word of God, we should read it as no other book – on our knees, humbly, reverently, prayerfully, looking to the Holy Spirit for illumination. But because Scripture is also the words of human beings, we should read it as we read every other book, using our minds, thinking, pondering and reflecting, and paying close attention to its literary, historical, cultural and linguistic characteristics. This combination of humble reverence and critical reflection is not only not impossible, it is indispensable.”

God’s Word is trustworthy and therefore has authority

Precisely because of the human dimension of the Bible, I find it difficult to use of the Bible such terms as ‘inerrant’ and ‘infallible’. Instead, on the basis of 2 Tim 3.16, I prefer to speak of the Bible being ‘trustworthy’ and therefore ‘authoritative’ and “trustworthy” for the purposes for which God inspired it, namely to guide people to salvation and to the associated way of life. As an Evangelical Christian, I believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God and as

such is the supreme and final authority for what Christians believe and how they live their life together.

The Lord's Prayer And Terrorism

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This article originated in a sermon series on the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father

When we say the Lord's Prayer, we realise there is more that unites us than divides us. We don't call God 'our' Father because we think he belongs to us; there is nothing proprietorial about the Lord's prayer. You might think that sets us apart from terrorists, as if 'they think they have God on their side, but we are much more humble!' Of course, that would be a delusion. The phrase 'Our Father' is first and foremost *inclusive*. It reminds us of our commonality. It pulls us away from 'us and them'. Without doubt, there were moments in Jesus' ministry when he delineated 'us and them', but the greatest and most radical accent was on inclusion.

Terrorism is largely defined by the rhetoric on both sides. The problem with rhetoric is that we are always inclined to believe our own and then be squeezed into living according to the limited choices it offers us. When we say, "Our Father..." we are coming before God who is bigger than us, and who knows the whole picture. In God's presence, therefore, we cannot simply hold on to our own rhetoric. We have to accept that God will call us to witness a bigger picture. Whenever we say the Lord's prayer, there is always the implication that we are going to have to change.

British journalist, Peter Taylor, focuses mostly on the IRA and Al Qaeda in his book *Talking to Terrorists* (Harper, 2011). In it he exposes the inaccuracies and unhelpfulness of our rhetoric. Rhetoric is not the same as truth. We use it to gain advantage and control. In the case of terrorism, it is all about having the power to define what is going on.