



A Poke in the Faith

Challenges to
evangelical faith
and how to
survive them

4th Edition



David Matthew

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Introduction

Not everybody has noticed it yet, but evangelical Christianity¹ is changing.

Beliefs and practices held dear for generations are coming under critical scrutiny as progressive pastors and biblical scholars put under the microscope some of the fundamentals of the faith. Here are a few of the current hot topics:

- Did Jesus, when he died on the cross, satisfy the wrath of God against sin? Some now say no, and suggest other ways of looking at what the atonement means.
- Does hell mean everlasting conscious torment? A growing number of Christians deny that vigorously.
- Does God determine everything that happens, as the Calvinistic wing of evangelicalism stoutly maintains? Certainly not, say Open Theists, just as stoutly.
- Are there errors and contradictions in the Bible? Yes, quite a lot, say some, who are then prepared to spell them out, yet without questioning its status as the Word of God.
- Did God create the universe in six literal days — or even in six long eras? Evangelicals who hold that some degree of evolution is compatible with creationism say no.

¹ The main features of this brand of Christianity were famously identified by David Bebbington, in his 1989 book *Evangelicalism In Modern Britain*, as (1) *biblicism*, i.e. a high regard for the Bible; (2) *crucicentrism*, i.e. a focus on the atoning work of Christ on the cross; (3) *conversionism*, i.e. the conviction that people need to be decisively converted to faith in Jesus; and (4) *activism*, i.e. the belief that faith needs to be expressed in the way we live.

- Are there solid biblical grounds for believing in ‘original sin’? Many doubt it, and side with the Eastern Orthodox Church, which has never taught it.

There are many more, but I wonder how you reacted as you read even this short list?

Maybe you thought, ‘Mmm. That’s interesting! I must look into some of those ideas sometime, if only to be equipped to combat them.’

Or perhaps you sighed, ‘Ah yes, this kind of grim stuff is nothing new: “The faith once for all delivered to the saints” has come under attack often down the centuries. But it has survived two thousand years without crumbling, so we needn’t worry about attacks today.’

Or maybe you got cross: ‘This is the devil’s work! And I have little time for so-called Christians naïve enough to fall for his lies! I resist every one of these heretical ideas!’

You may be wondering, at this point, what my own reaction is and thus where this book is going. What you have read so far may have unsettled you a bit. You’re thinking it might be best to ditch it now, while the going’s good. After all, you don’t want to stick with it only to discover, at the end, that you have inadvertently swallowed poison. So, I need to put my cards on the table right away with a bit of background and some pointers to where I stand.

Where I come from

Raised in an Open Brethren church, I made a personal commitment of my life to Christ at the age of twelve. A couple of years later I was baptised in water as a believer. After another couple of years I had a dramatic experience of being baptised in the Holy Spirit — which

must have been God, because churches like ours were cessationist¹ and didn't believe in it!

In my late teens, all fired up and with a deep love of the Scriptures, I taught myself New Testament Greek and began to read books like Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*. In due course I became a church elder and particularly enjoyed teaching the Bible. At the age of thirty-five I left my school-teaching job to go into 'full time Christian service' with a network of charismatic churches called Covenant Ministries, based in the UK. I travelled widely, both in Britain and overseas, to teach the Bible; I edited a Christian magazine for some years; I was instrumental in setting up two Bible colleges, in both of which I served as Principal for some years and did a fair bit of the teaching.

During all this time I read widely in theology, trying to keep up with what was happening in the vanguard of evangelical thinking. I posted lots of book reviews on my website, which drew me into correspondence with people from all over the world, including some authors of fairly controversial books. I'm now well into my retirement, and still working at keeping abreast of things.

Where I stand

My commitment to Jesus Christ, to his people and to the Scriptures remains undiminished. But I have undergone some changes in my views on certain aspects of the faith — including some of the ones listed above. I want to come clean and say that grappling with these issues hasn't always been easy. In fact, they have caused me quite a few spiritual wobbles at times.

¹ That is, they believed that the baptism and gifts of the Holy Spirit ceased when the canon of the New Testament was complete.

I have come out the other side of those wobbles and find that my faith is now stronger and fresher than it has ever been since I became a Christian close on seventy years ago. And my desire, in writing this book, is to help you reach a similar happy place.

Your choices

That, then, is where I stand. My intention in what follows is two-fold. First, I want to introduce you to some of the new ideas² that are challenging traditional views of the Christian faith in general and of the Bible in particular. I will do this as one who believes these ideas should be taken seriously. And second, I want to convince you that you can embrace some or all of them without losing your faith. Indeed, I want to strengthen you in your faith. But I will be asking some searching questions about issues that you may never have questioned, and you need to be prepared for that.

Which leaves you now with two choices. You can say, 'I don't think I'm ready to have my boat rocked, thank you. I'm happy living out my Christian faith as it currently is, in the company of good friends in my church, and I've no wish to risk anything changing that.' Okay. Shut the book now, and God bless you. But if you do that, I suspect it won't be long before some of these issues sneak up on you from other, less sympathetic, quarters, and you can only keep your head stuck in the sand for so long. Might it not be better to face them in my company, as someone who is rooting for you and your faith, rather than risk being shot down in flames by some bitter ex-Christian?

² Though, as we will see, some of them are in fact very old ideas, embraced by the early church, but they somehow got lost down the centuries.

That's why I'd recommend the second choice, which is for you to say, 'Okay, I've suspected that some big issues are brewing in the background. It worries me, but I'm not one to shut my eyes and pretend it's not happening. So here goes: I'll stick with the book and hope it does me some good!'

I think it will.

1 - Tower of Faith

Ah, so you're still with me! Well done!

Before we go any further, I want to help you put a key defence in place. This will help you cope with any wobbles that later chapters may create.

Tower of blocks

There's a game you may have played that's a great favourite at family get-togethers and informal gatherings. The game starts with a tower of about 50 rectangular wooden blocks. You set it up on the coffee table and all gather round. When it's your turn you have to use just one hand to remove one of the blocks — carefully, because if the tower collapses as a result, you've lost. You place the removed block on the top of the tower, and then it's the next person's turn. The tower naturally becomes more and more unstable as blocks are removed until, eventually, some poor soul brings the whole thing crashing down and everybody shrieks with delight.

Most evangelical Christians have a belief-system like this kind of tower. The blocks represent the different items in that belief-system. If somebody starts messing with the blocks, the system becomes more and more unstable, with the frightening possibility that, if it continues, sooner or later the whole belief-system will fall down. If that happens to you, your faith will be gone. You will have lost the structure on which you relied for stability in your Christianity, and thus in your life. It will throw into question the reality of your relationship with Christ, and you could quickly become a disillusioned cynic: 'Oh yes, I used to be a Christian, but I just can't believe all that stuff anymore.'

I've seen too many good people go that sad way. I don't want you to join them.

Shifting blocks

So which blocks can — and can't — be removed without jeopardising the whole structure? That will vary from one Christian to another, but let's look at a few sample blocks in the average believer's faith-tower.

Here's a typical one that I'll put in the form of a question: *Was Adam a real historical person?* Most evangelical Christians would instantly reply, 'Yes, of course he was! I take a literal view of the Bible whenever possible, and I can't think of any reason to doubt that Adam was as Genesis describes him — a real person, and our first parent.'

Fair enough. But — and here I start poking the block — some Christians, including many who regard themselves as serious evangelicals, now question or deny the historicity of Adam. They prefer to see him as a 'cipher', a token figure representing humanity as a whole. They offer various reasons for that view. Some would say, for instance, that science gets in the way of regarding him as a historical person. Evolution, they would point out, has now been so well verified as a key factor in the emergence of *homo sapiens* that it's impossible to square it with the Genesis account of human origins. The DNA evidence simply doesn't allow it. If the science is solid, as it seems to be, our only option is to adjust our interpretation of Genesis and see Adam as a cipher, not as a literal individual.

Others say that you can concede that Adam is used as a cipher in Scripture without ditching the idea that he and Eve were real people. I'm inclined to that view myself. But supporters of this view would not agree that Adam and Eve were the original pair of human beings God made. Rather, they would see them as real people, but ones chosen by God from the existing population of hominids to be his

image in society at large. If you have held the traditional evangelical view, all this can be quite unsettling; but at the end of this book I will point you to the writings of others where you can pursue the subject further if you wish.

Maybe having that particular block moved is something you can cope with. You reckon that you could take either line on Adam without your faith being shaken. Your tower remains steady. But what if somebody next pulls out another block — a key one near the foot of the tower? They point out that the Apostle Paul’s major argument about the universality of sin and the universality of Christ’s redemptive work is based on his analogy between Adam and Jesus.³ Indeed, Paul calls Jesus ‘the last Adam’. Jesus was a real person, of course, so for the argument to work, Adam must surely have been one, too? Either Adam and Jesus were *both* historical figures, they insist, or they weren’t. Deny Adam’s historicity and you are close to denying the historicity of Christ himself. And that’s a major wobbler. It could be a tower-toppler.

I personally think that this either/or argument is not as solid as they make out, but that’s not the point here. Just *thinking* about such things can be frightening, which is why you should consider ditching the ‘tower of blocks’ approach to your faith altogether. And yes, there are alternatives. A different approach could mean being able to hold on to your love for Jesus as Lord and Saviour, and your respect for the Scriptures as in some way, at least, ‘the Word of God’, without being wobbled by issues like the Adam question. That would be a great advantage if your faith-structure is delicate.

³ See Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:21-22.

In looking at the nature of belief-systems, author Greg Boyd uses a different metaphor.⁴ He talks about a ‘house of cards’ approach to faith. A house of cards is a more fragile structure than the blocks game we have talked about. A mere touch on a single card and the whole thing falls. Maybe some Christians hold their beliefs in a framework as sensitive as that, while others, though still grouping their beliefs together into an interrelated structure, would consider theirs a bit more robust. But neither is robust enough if your relationship with Jesus Christ sits on top of it. If the tower topples, he comes down with it as your Lord and Saviour.

All you need to know at this stage is that the ‘Adam block’ is being widely poked today.⁵ And there are others...

Does God turn away from sinners?

You were probably taught, as was I, that God, being holy and pure, is repelled by sin and turns his back on the sinners who commit it. We could say he has a sin-allergy.

My wife is allergic to cats. If she goes anywhere near one, it’s not long before her eyes puff up and begin to water profusely. Then breathing becomes more and more difficult. So, when she comes across a cat, she gets right away from it without delay. It’s the same, we have been told, with God and sinners. The two standard proof-texts are both in the Old Testament. One is ‘Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing’ (Habakkuk 1:13). And the other, addressed to the Israelites: ‘Your iniquities have separated you from your God’ (Isaiah 59:2).

⁴ See Gregory A. Boyd, *Benefit Of The Doubt* (Baker Books, 2013).

⁵ If you want to follow this up right now, I recommend the short and balanced article on it by N.T. Wright included in John H. Walton, *The Lost World Of Adam And Eve* (IVP Academic, 2015).

At first sight, that seems clear enough. But the block-pokers on this one have some strong points. Only by taking both statements out of context, they note, can you give them this meaning. On the Isaiah verse, they point out that this is not a blanket statement about the human condition in general but is addressed to Israel in specific circumstances of apostasy and wickedness, as the succeeding verses make plain. And even then it doesn't suggest a total shrinking away on God's part but just a holding back from answering their prayers. What's more, the passage goes on to show (verses 15-21) that, far from distancing himself from the problem, God *moves towards it*, taking the initiative in acting decisively to sort things out and repair the breach.

It's the same with the quotation from Habakkuk, which is just half a verse. Read the second half, and the sense is clear. The prophet isn't making a general statement about God's sin-aversion. He is saying, 'You can't tolerate sin, God, so *why are you doing just that?*' His tone is implying that, far from being repelled by the sin, God, being pure and holy, can't resist moving right into the situation and doing something to fix it.

Certainly, events in Scripture back up that view. When Adam and Eve fell into sin, did God run away in horror? No, he came looking for them, graciously barring them from the tree of life so that they didn't end up living forever in a fallen condition. Then he fixed them up with garments of skin. Later, Cain killed Abel. Again, did God turn his back on him? On the contrary, he went looking for him to face him up with his crime, then shielded him from avengers by putting a mark of protection on him. This pattern, the block-pokers show, runs right through the Bible, ending with Jesus, who never shied away from sinners but instead drew the Pharisees' disapproval by talking to them, affirming them, forgiving them without having to be asked, and going for meals with them.

This, you may think, is a minor change from the traditional portrayal of God as sin-allergic. But it has major knock-on effects. It suggests, for example, that God didn't in fact turn his back on Jesus when he was bearing our sin on the cross, as we have traditionally been taught. That could affect your understanding of some gospel basics — and thus alter the way you present the message to others.

How many Legions?

Another typical block is the belief that the Bible, if it is indeed God's Word, as we have been taught, must be as perfect as the God who revealed it. It must therefore be error-free or, to use the technical term, 'inerrant'. That block is being moved more than most today.

The block-pushers say, yes, it is divinely inspired, but it also had human authors, who were less than perfect, as well as being people of their era. That means they had some old-fashioned ideas that we now know were mistaken. As a result — and this is a potential tower-shaker for many — there are errors and contradictions in the Bible. For example, was a single demonised man called Legion restored to normality by Jesus at Gadara, or were there two of them? Mark and Luke's versions of the incident say one,⁶ while Matthew's version has two.⁷ There's no agreed explanation for the difference. And it's not an isolated case, because Matthew elsewhere doubles things up like this.⁸

⁶ Mark 5:1-20 and Luke 8:26-39.

⁷ Matthew 8:28-34.

⁸ For example, Matthew has two blind men near Jericho calling on Jesus for help and receiving his healing touch (20:29-34). Mark has only one (10:46-52) and so does Luke (18:35-43). Some say that, because those healed acknowledged Jesus to be Son of God, or Son of David—radical statements to Jewish ears—Matthew, who wrote particularly for Jewish readers, knew that Jewish law required testimony from a minimum of two witnesses and so did the doubling up to make the point. Of course, our 21st-century approach to history insists on factuality above everything else, so we say, 'Either there was one man, or there were two. It

What do you make of that? Your logical modern mind insists that either there was one man or there were two. It can't be both. So you feel you have to come up with something like, 'Well, since Matthew says two, there actually were two. But probably one was a better-known local character than the other, so Mark and Luke only mention the well-known one' — which doesn't sound very convincing. And if you can't find a satisfactory explanation, the only alternative, you may feel, is that here we have an inconsistency in the Gospels or, to be more blunt, 'a contradiction in the Word of God'. And, oh dear, your faith is in that Word. So, if a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, bang goes all your trust in Scripture. Suddenly you have no confidence that *anything* it says can be trusted, including what it says about Jesus and salvation. Your tower topples down.

A problem with science?

One more sample block before we move on: human origins. This brings us back to the 'creation versus evolution' issue that we mentioned in passing just now.

Some Christians believe that the opening chapters of Genesis offer a scientific explanation of the origin of the universe and, specifically, of the human race. But science takes a different line. It may concede that everything began with the Big Bang, which many Christians feel able to equate with God's creative act, so no major problem there. But other aspects are more problematic. Scientists, for instance, are unanimous in their conviction, first, that the universe is billions of years old and, second, that macro-evolution accounts for the different species we see in today's world, including *homo sapiens*. The evidence for all this, they point out, is stacking up at a fair old rate and no-one

can't be both. Which was it, then?' But in ancient times historians didn't write with that approach. We will touch on this later.

with their head screwed on can sensibly deny it. So, you feel you have to choose between two views that appear to be mutually exclusive, and, being a committed Christian, your first inclination is to go for ‘the Bible view’.

But if science is, as someone wisely said, ‘thinking God’s thoughts after him’, we should surely have nothing to fear from its findings? Scientific evidence is as much ‘God’s word’ as is Holy Scripture. So maybe it’s the classical interpretation of Genesis that we need to question, and that’s exactly what many are doing. What matters, they say, is not what the text *says* — that’s clear enough — but what it *means*. And, they would suggest, it doesn’t mean what we have traditionally taken it to mean.

Try to resist your reaction to write these people off as woolly liberals or atheists; they are not. They are, in fact, sincere evangelical believers. What’s more, they point out that this debate has no necessary connection with the nature of God or your trust in Jesus and daily walk with him. You can, they reckon, examine the issues with an open mind and heart without bringing the tower down.

Ditching the ‘tower approach’

We have identified, then, four typical blocks in the average Christian’s belief-tower: (1) Adam was our literal first parent; (2) God shudders and turns away from sinners; (3) The Bible is free of contradictions and errors; and (4) Genesis is a scientific account of material origins. All four, plus many others, are today being widely pushed and poked, drawn out of the tower and moved. As a result, many people’s ‘tower of blocks’ belief-systems are in danger of toppling. They are suffering from the grimly unsettling condition called ‘cognitive dissonance’, as beliefs they have held dear are shown to be open to question.

But do their towers *have* to topple? Is this mega-interconnectedness essential?

You can see, I hope, what an advantage it would be to get away from the tightly-structured approach to faith where a challenge to one part threatens every part — including your very walk with God. Is it possible to make the break? Speaking from experience I can say yes, it certainly is. The next step, then, is to look at how you can do it. *How* can you part company with the tower approach to faith and remain a committed Christian?

Start by acknowledging that it won't be easy, because we are creatures of habit — none of us lets go of entrenched convictions without a struggle. Then ask yourself *why* the many elements of your belief-system are as interconnected as they are. Most likely it is because that's the approach you learnt from your spiritual seniors, the believers who mentored you in your early days as a Christian. It has probably been a 'given' of your denomination or network of churches, the default mode that no-one ever thinks of questioning. Well, it's time to start thinking outside the box. Some of your friends will gasp in horror if they find out, but don't let that put you off. God won't gasp with them. He loves it when we are honest, and when we use the minds he gave us.

So think about this: if you have a living relationship with Jesus Christ, why should it be affected by whether or not Adam was the literal first human being? It need not be. Whether he was our literal first parent or a generic term for 'humanity' (or something in between) doesn't alter the fact that the human race is where it is today, with you a part of it. Nor does it alter the fact that Jesus came, lived a sinless life, died to save us, rose and ascended. He is alive and well, and so are you. Your spiritual relationship with him really need not be threatened by differing views on the nature of Adam.

It's the same with contradictions like the 'one Legion or two' issue. Do these really matter so much that your entire spiritual standing must be affected? Absolutely not! That's all you need to settle in your mind and heart right now.

When you think about it, you probably have hundreds of little views about aspects of Scripture and Christianity that need have no impact at all on your living experience of the Lord. Here, then, is where you need to begin. *Make a conscious decision that you won't let minor issues touch the heart of your faith.*⁹ Turn your back on the 'tower of blocks' approach to Christianity. If you're anything like me you may even find, to your surprise, that doing so actually gives your faith a boost.

The next question is 'How do I ditch that approach, and what's the alternative?'

Jesus First

The tower-mentality develops out of *an unbalanced attitude to the Bible*.

It is vital to remember that the heart of your faith is Jesus, not the Bible. It is he alone who calls you friend and brother, he the one who joined you to the Father and whose Spirit's presence you enjoy, the Spirit who enables you to call God 'Abba'. As a 'Christian' you are joined to 'Christ'; everything else is secondary.

Somebody once joked that, for Roman Catholics, the Trinity is Father, Son and Holy Mother Church, while for evangelicals it is Father, Son and Holy Bible. Jest's like this often hide an element of truth, and in my experience some evangelical Christians come dangerously close to putting the Bible, rather than Jesus, in first place.

⁹ Compared with your walk with the Lord, *every* issue is a minor one!

As one writer puts it, they ‘tend to lock Jesus Christ up inside the covers of a book.’¹⁰

The Bible, naturally, is the main means by which we discover who Jesus truly is. But we must take care that the worship and devotion due solely to him doesn’t get diverted from the end to the means. One Christian writer signalled a key adjustment that he made in his personal pilgrimage when he wrote, ‘Rather than believing in Jesus because I believe the Bible to be the inspired Word of God, as evangelicals typically do, I came to believe the Bible was the inspired Word of God *because I first believe in Jesus.*’¹¹

He had realised that there are solid reasons for believing Jesus to be who he claimed to be, without having to rely solely on the Bible. Many Christians share this position, and here are some of those reasons.

1. External testimony

The Bible is not the only source of information about Jesus. As a historical figure, he is referred to in *many non-biblical written sources* — Greek, Roman, Jewish and Samaritan — dating from early times. One is the first-century Roman historian Tacitus. Describing the great fire of Rome, for which the Emperor Nero was blamed, he wrote:

‘To get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous

¹⁰ Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Zondervan, 2013, p344, quoting Timothy Tennent).

¹¹ Gregory A. Boyd, *Benefit Of The Doubt* (Baker Books, 2013).

superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome.’¹²

Any book on Christian apologetics will list lots of other examples.¹³ You won’t find these outside sources giving information about the *purpose* of Jesus’ coming, of course, but they do confirm his existence as a real figure of history — something that sceptics have often denied.

2. Personal experience

Then you know Jesus from your *personal Christian experience*. Evangelicalism has tended to play this down as too subjective and thus unreliable, but that approach has to be questioned — it’s interesting that the Bible itself sets great store by personal experience of God! If you have been taught that your experience is unimportant and not to be trusted, I invite you to review that position.

Looking back on my own life, I can identify occasions when I have had what can only be described as encounters with the Lord. I don’t understand all the mental and emotional factors involved in those encounters, but I am utterly convinced that there was a ‘spiritual’ element in them, too, where my small and limited human existence was somehow touched, and changed by, the transcendent and divine. These encounters have been so real that no amount of rational argument could come even close to destroying my confidence that I have met the living Christ.

I trust you can say the same, though of course the details of your experience will be unique to you. Such encounters do not rely on the Bible, though the Bible will shed light on them. They stand valid in their own right, as foundation-stones of your conviction that Jesus is

¹² Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44.

¹³ Or go to <http://coldcasechristianity.com/2014/is-there-any-evidence-for-jesus-outside-the-bible/> Accessed 3 Mar 2016.

who, according to Scripture, he claimed to be. With this conviction you are free to examine questions about the Bible or Christian doctrine without your closeness to Jesus being affected.

3. The growth and influence of Christianity

There is another extra-biblical reason for believing in Jesus: *two thousand years of Christian history*.

Church history, sadly, is littered with regrettable episodes — like the medieval Crusades — that are a poor reflection on the message of Christ. But these are minor compared with the vast blessing and benefit that belief in Jesus has brought to countless millions of people between the first century and now. When folk put their trust in him, not only do they change for the better as they get their lives gradually straightened out, but the people and institutions in their circle of influence feel positive benefits, too. Life is better all round when Jesus is involved. The fact that this has been consistently true for over twenty centuries is a powerful testimony to the validity of Jesus' claims.

We see this transforming power at work in Jesus' original disciples. From them the message spread from Judea to the Samaritans and eventually to the Gentile world. Today the Christian church is a vast worldwide family that, in spite of all its failings, continues to be of untold benefit to society at large. That such a positive phenomenon would develop on the back of a lie or misunderstanding is unthinkable. It is a powerful undergirding of the conviction that Jesus is who he said he was.

4. Making sense of life and the world

I also believe in Jesus because *he enables me to make good sense of my everyday life, and the world as I experience it*. It is a basic human trait to

want to make sense of life, to discover its meaning and see some kind of purpose in it. We all want to know why we exist, what life is *for*, what death is all about, and what the future holds. Philosophers have grappled with such issues as long as humanity has existed. It is my own deep conviction that everything makes best sense in the light of the loving and gracious character of Jesus and of the Father whom he revealed. That's another good reason to believe in Jesus, and it stands separate from controversial Bible issues.

Each of these lines of argument could be developed further. But I hope that, as I have presented them, they have helped to assure you that *you can hold fast to Jesus while moving away from tower-style Christianity*. You can be free to look critically at specific issues without feeling that your entire faith is under threat.

Pause here if necessary and review your situation. When you feel ready you can read on.

2 - The Place of the Bible

We have agreed that it's Jesus first. The Bible comes somewhere further down the line. But we have conceded, too, that the Bible remains of great importance to us as Christian people. So, we'll take a closer look at it and see if it is everything that evangelicals have claimed it is. Be warned: block-poking ahead...

In my library I have a couple of dozen hefty tomes with the words 'Systematic Theology' in the title. Each one is an attempt by a biblical scholar to set out the essentials of the Christian faith in a 'systematic' way. If you were going to write such a book yourself — and I'd advise you not to bother as there are plenty already — which topic would you start it with?

Perhaps, because writers are human, it would make sense to start with *The Doctrine of Humanity*, outlining our nature as human beings, our sinfulness, and our need of a Saviour. That would lead on naturally to *The Doctrine of God*, who acted to solve the problem. I have one volume that follows this order. Or you could take the view that, God being ultimate and superior, *The Doctrine of God* should come first, and this is the line that most systematic theologies in fact take. Then there's an interesting third group that start with *The Doctrine of Scripture*. Why would they do that? Because they believe that Scripture is the only source of our information on every other topic: God, humanity, redemption, the work of Christ, sanctification, and everything else through to eschatology. I have two systematic theologies that follow this pattern.¹⁴

¹⁴ Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, and Guy Duffield's *Foundations Of Pentecostal Theology*.

This pattern is suspect, I believe. It makes absolutely everything dependent on the Bible, which is usually where a ‘tower of blocks’ approach to theology begins — and we have decided we don’t want that. The Lord himself comes first, not the Bible. Our love and loyalty belong to a divine being, not to a book.

But clearly the Bible remains fundamental to the shaping of our beliefs, and properly so. We hold that it is — in some sense or other — ‘the Word of God’, and we often find attached to it labels like ‘inspired’ and ‘inerrant’. This is one of the areas of Christian belief that have come under close scrutiny in recent times, so we need to identify what we *mean* when we say the Bible is God’s Word. And we need to be clearer what we mean by ‘inspired’. Most of all, we need to decide what ‘inerrant’ means and whether we feel that this is a suitable term to describe it. I warn you now that many feel it is not.

There is currently a clear move away from unrealistic idealism about the Bible. This has come about chiefly as some brave souls have faced up to issues which, for too long, most evangelicals have avoided tackling. One of these is the fact that the Bible ‘speaks with many voices’.

The Bible: many voices

To explain what this means I would like to draw your attention to a fact or two from the history of the church.

It may surprise you to know that, for the first few centuries of the Christian era, most people didn’t have the Bible. It wouldn’t have done them much good if they had, because the common people were illiterate. The Old Testament was well settled by then. The writings that eventually made up our New Testament were in limited circulation, but it wasn’t until 397AD that an official council of church leaders gave formal recognition to those twenty-seven books.

It would be another thousand years before printing was invented, so even the official New Testament, since copies had to be made by hand, didn't circulate widely.

How, then, did sincere followers of Jesus in those first 400 years manage to keep their faith on the straight and narrow without access to the Bible, and particularly the New Testament? Pretty well, it seems. Which is encouraging, because, if they could keep their walk with the Lord in good shape without a New Testament to depend on, so can you.

In the Middle Ages, the church, which had up to that time enjoyed a fair degree of unity, fell into disagreement and divided into two major parts, based geographically on the eastern and western halves of the old Roman Empire. The eastern section became known as the Eastern Orthodox Church, which is still active today in places like Greece, Serbia and Russia. Its headquarters were in present-day Istanbul, then known as Constantinople. The western section became known as the Roman Catholic Church, with its headquarters in Rome. Both sections had the utmost respect for Scripture as God's revelation, though they held that only the official leaders of the church were qualified to interpret it, and in practice they accorded as much authority to church tradition as they did to the Bible. On that basis both sections of the church managed to maintain a substantial degree of unity.

Back to the Bible

Then, in the sixteenth century, came the movement called the Reformation, associated with names like Martin Luther and John Calvin. This affected only the western church. It was a powerful movement that rocked the whole of Western European society and its colonies. It pointed out the widespread corruption in the Roman

Catholic Church's priesthood and the suspect nature of many of its doctrines and practices, and looked for change. Most significantly, its leaders went to *Scripture* to find the way forward, convinced that the Bible alone was a reliable source for finding God's will on matters of Christian doctrine and practice. And so the Reformation divided the western church. Different countries either signed up to remain loyal to Roman Catholicism and the Pope, or set up new national Protestant churches on Reformed lines.

In those parts of Europe where the Reformation took hold, people were *encouraged to read the Scriptures for themselves* — something that became possible with the invention of the printing press and growing literacy. One of the Protestant ideas prominent at that period was 'the *perspicuity* of Scripture'. This held that the Bible's meaning was plain and pretty much self-explanatory, so that the average lay person could, in reading it, expect to arrive at God's truth. There was still pressure on people to go along with the official interpretation of the Bible put out by the church's leaders in the standard confessions of faith, but they could read it for themselves at last.

The start of division

In Protestant circles it wasn't long before people who read and studied the Bible came to see that it didn't seem to support all of the official church's doctrines and practices. Some, for example, concluded from their Bible-study that baptism should only be administered to people old enough to make a conscious faith-commitment to Christ. That meant that the practice of infant baptism, which had been the norm for centuries and which the Protestant churches had carried over from their Roman Catholic background, was suspect. These people couldn't, in good conscience, go along with it. So, they broke away from mainline Protestantism and established separatist groups based

on believers' baptism. That's how the Baptist Church, for example, came into being, in 1611. The point is: *Bible-reading had caused division.*

Others read the Bible to see what it said about church government. To their amazement it seemed to say nothing at all about diocesan bishops but described how, in the early church as described in Acts, the church members were asked to nominate people for appointment to responsible roles. These readers wanted to order their affairs biblically, so they began to campaign for an electoral system of church government, which they called congregationalism, because the congregation chose its leaders. And that system was not only scriptural, they maintained, but also logical: it's easier to work confidently with leaders when you have had a hand in their selection, whereas it can be more difficult when you're stuck with some leader appointed by the hierarchy with no reference to you and your fellow-members.

Some felt so strongly about this as a 'biblical principle' that, when the official church refused to budge on the issue, they too broke away from it and established new churches based on the members' right to elect their leaders. That's how the Congregational Church came into being, around the same time as the Baptist Church. Both Congregationalists and Baptists took the same view on leadership. But their agreement didn't extend to baptismal practice: the Baptists combined their leadership ideas with believers' baptism, while the Congregationalists were content to continue baptising infants.

Meanwhile, other Christians were reading the same Bible and reached different conclusions again about church government. They found no room there for diocesan bishops. They weren't convinced, either, of the congregational case. Instead, they latched onto the notion that each church mentioned in the New Testament seems to have had a plurality of elders, or presbyters. Sure, one of these may

well have had a degree of natural leadership ability beyond the rest, and they had no problem with such a leader being recognised as a kind of ‘first among equals’, but their big insistence was on leadership plurality.

So, what did they do? They established Presbyterian (multi-elder) churches on that principle. They then looked down their noses at the official church (which in my native country was the Church of England) for its diocesan system but went along with its infant baptism. And they looked with favour on the Congregationalists for their baptismal views but frowned on the Baptists for theirs. Meanwhile, the Baptists and Congregationalists smiled at each other for their stance on church leadership but crossed swords over each other’s baptismal position.

Division was spreading fast, and *all triggered by people reading the Bible*. Some even appealed to it in support of the traditional diocesan system. Look at the church in Jerusalem, they said. According to Acts it had a minimum of three thousand members almost from the word go, with rapid growth after that, so it must have met in a large number of different congregations, or churches, in different parts of the city. Each of those would have had its own leaders, but it’s clear that James was the head honcho over them all.¹⁵ So there he was — a diocesan bishop in practice, if not in title. And what was good enough for Jerusalem and district is good enough today. Case closed.

In the centuries that followed, further divisions occurred over a host of other issues, both doctrinal and practical. We won’t bother going into them here because the point is clear enough: *sincere*

¹⁵ E.g. Galatians 2:12. The leaders from the Jerusalem church who came to Antioch are said to have ‘come from James’.

Christian people reading the same Bible reach completely different conclusions as to what it teaches!

Division goes viral

Where has this trend led? Today the Eastern Orthodox Church lumbers along much as it has always done. There are some very godly people in it, but many Christians of other persuasions find it difficult to cope with the prominence it gives to practices like the burning of incense, the tortuous liturgies and the kissing of icons. But the EO Church, for all its perceived weaknesses, can boast a robust unity. And it claims, rather smugly, that it never had a Reformation because it never needed one! The Roman Catholic Church, too, turns off many Protestants by its ceremonial practices, by the adulation it gives to the Pope and its embracing of doctrines like the Assumption of Mary. But, in spite of some challenges from insiders, it can still claim a high degree of unity.

And what of the rest — those churches that are neither Orthodox nor Catholic? They claim to be the *real* followers of the Bible and its teaching, free to let it speak for itself and to follow where it leads. Though many of their members may never have heard the term ‘the perspicuity of Scripture’, they hold to it unswervingly. And what has been the result? Where has this freedom to ‘do what the Bible teaches’ led? To an appalling lack of unity! The Protestant church worldwide today consists of around 9,000 different denominations.¹⁶ So it’s nil points for unity, that’s for sure!

‘Ah, yes,’ you may say, ‘but sometimes you have to sacrifice unity in the interests of maintaining the truth.’

¹⁶ See Barrett, Kurian and Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Oxford University Press, 2nd edition, 2001, page 16). The number is 8,973 Protestant denominations for the year 2000. Some believe the number is in fact far greater.

That may be so, but we need to ask, like Pontius Pilate, ‘What is truth?’ If you reply, ‘It’s what the Bible teaches’, then we have a major problem, because most of today’s 9,000 Protestant denominations exist because their founders read the Bible, felt they had arrived at an understanding of its ‘truth’, and so set up a new denomination to maintain and propagate it. Isn’t it pretty obvious that, if the Bible were as clear and unequivocal as we make out, we would all be reaching the same, or at least very similar, conclusions about what it teaches?

Maybe we should think again about the claim of Jesus, who said, ‘*I am...the truth*’. If ultimate truth is to be found in him *as a person*, the divisive ‘book’ bit becomes less important.

The Bible is not always clear

I invite you, then, to face this rather unpalatable fact: the Bible, on many topics, is not clear at all.

The results speak for themselves. It is far from ‘perspicuous’. Five people can read the same passage, study it in detail, examine the Hebrew or Greek and the cultural background, and reach five different conclusions as to what it means. And this is not a phenomenon affecting only the ivory tower of ideas; it has harmful practical effects in the lives and relationships of Christian people everywhere. And that is definitely not good. While Jesus prayed for the unity of believers, our commitment to ‘Bible truth’ has produced widespread division.

You may be smiling smugly to yourself as you read this, thinking, ‘Ah yes, well, people are entitled to their views of what the Bible teaches. It’s a shame so many have got it wrong. But, praise God, I know I’ve got it right. I’ve studied the Word in depth. What’s more, I’ve prayed about it and asked the Holy Spirit — who Jesus said would guide his people into all truth — to show me what its true

teaching is, and I have full confidence that my understanding of it is the right one.’

Dream on! People in 9,000 denominations are thinking exactly the same thing about *their* views.

And don’t kid yourself that people who reach erroneous conclusions (in your opinion) about the Bible’s teaching are all simple, untrained souls, short on brains and analytical powers. Opposing conclusions have equally been reached by biblical scholars with umpteen years of seminary training, a string of degrees including a couple of PhDs, a detailed knowledge of biblical Hebrew and Greek, and long years of teaching experience. And we can’t write them off as liberals with no respect for the inspiration of the Bible and no personal faith in Christ. For the most part, the opposite is true: they are deeply committed Christians living godly lives, with a sincere love for the Lord and his people, active in local church life and convinced that the Bible is, in some sense, God’s revealed Word.

To prove it, in my library I have many books of the ‘different views on...’ variety. They all come from the evangelical wing of the church, with chapters by different scholarly writers setting out their position. Here is a selection of titles:

- Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews
- Revelation: Four Views
- Three Views on Creation and Evolution
- Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity
- Four Views on the Historical Adam
- Understanding Four Views on Baptism
- Five Views on Law and Gospel
- Perspectives on Spirit Baptism: Five Views

And there are many more. It wouldn't be so bad if it were only *two* slightly different views on this or that, but three, four and five...!

If even godly biblical scholars can't agree on basic topics like these, we can draw only one conclusion: on many topics the Bible is frustratingly unclear. Or as one writer puts it, it suffers from 'pervasive interpretive pluralism'.¹⁷ Perspicuous it may be in the sense that the reader can get the *big picture* of God's dealings with humanity, culminating in Jesus, and come to a place of real faith. But perspicuous in the sense of providing clarity on the details it certainly is not.

Now pause and let that sink in, because it is true, and you won't be able to move forward until you face it fair and square. It need not bring your tower down. In fact, it could be one more encouragement to ditch the tower approach altogether. Meanwhile, let's take things a bit further, because we haven't finished with the Bible issue yet.

¹⁷ Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicalism is not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Brazos Press, 2012).

3 - What the Bible is Not

We have seen how, on many topics, the Bible speaks with more than one voice. It is often disturbingly unclear, leading sincere readers to different conclusions. Perhaps we are expecting more of it than God ever intended it to give us? Either way, its many-voiced nature will help us decide what the Bible is *not* — an idea we will look at before attempting to say what it *is*.

The Bible is not a manual

Many today are pointing out that the Bible is not a manual — and I think they are right. By ‘manual’ I mean the kind of thing you get with your new TV or food mixer. It’s the manufacturer’s instructions, telling you how to use the product safely and efficiently. All the answers are in there, from setting the appliance up to troubleshooting when it doesn’t work.

Many evangelicals view the Bible this way. God is the Maker and the Bible is his ‘user manual’ for the likes of us. If we follow its instructions, we’ll do fine, but ignore them and we court disaster. On this view, the Bible is a manual covering several different areas, like church practice, life skills and doctrine.

...of church practice

For a start, the Bible doesn’t stand up as a *manual of church practice*.

We have already seen some different views on church government that supporters claim to base on ‘what the Bible teaches’. The views can’t all be right. Maybe none of them is right. Maybe there isn’t, in fact, a ‘right’ view to be found in its pages. Maybe you can have any kind of church government you like that is practical and convenient for your church in its particular circumstances and, assuming that the

leaders are godly people with a servant-heart, dedicated to the people's welfare, the Lord will smile upon it. Wouldn't that be liberating!

Let's take a few examples of how treating the Bible as a manual of church practice can be a problem.

Example 1: Housegroup Leaders

Back in the 1970s some colleagues of mine and I set up a church in our city through a merger of three smaller ones from different backgrounds and traditions. We decided that 'going to church on Sunday' wouldn't meet all the members' needs, and that we needed to provide opportunities for more intimate fellowship than the Sunday meeting. To that end we introduced weekly housegroups. These met in people's homes, and we put a mature Christian or two in charge of each one — usually a married couple. It went well. For convenience we called the leaders 'housegroup leaders', abbreviated to HGLs, and the elders met with them regularly to guide and encourage them.

Then somebody pointed out that, according to the New Testament (Aha! That could spell trouble!), there are only two types of leaders in the church: elders (sometimes called presbyters, overseers or shepherds/pastors) and deacons. So where did our HGLs fit in? Were they elders? Clearly not, since they were accountable to the elders. Deacons, then? But the New Testament deacons seem to have been involved chiefly, if not entirely, with practical administrative affairs like organising food handouts to widows, whereas our HGLs' role was chiefly pastoral. What, then, were they? A kind of unbiblical hybrid? Some had strong opinions on this and felt we should abolish them because they didn't fit 'the New Testament pattern'. Controversy and some division thus arose from viewing the Bible as a manual of church practice.

At the risk of poking one of the blocks in your tower, I have to say that, today, this would not be an issue for me, because I don't see the Bible as offering a leadership blueprint. Elders and deacons may have met the need in New Testament times, but that pattern I now consider to be a broad and helpful guideline to current practice, and nothing more. Housegroup leaders don't fit tidily into either category, that's for sure. But so what? At the time we needed housegroups. We needed people to lead the housegroups and so we appointed them. They were 'housegroup leaders', no more and no less. They did a great job and the church prospered. We were only being 'unbiblical' if we assumed that the New Testament has a fixed pattern for everything — which it manifestly doesn't.

Example 2: Deacons

On another occasion the church I was in felt we needed to reassess the role of deacons, and it fell to me to produce a discussion paper on the subject. I did the usual thing: went through the New Testament scanning all the relevant sections and noting every mention of the Greek noun *diakonos*. I categorised them and tried to draw up a clear picture of deacons' qualifications and role.

It wasn't as simple as you may think. *Diakonos* is a general word for 'servant' in addition to its specialised church use as 'deacon'.¹⁸ So what about the associated verb, *diakoneo*, meaning 'to serve'? Could we legitimately draw any conclusions about the nature and work of deacons from that word's use in certain places? As I found, there's no solid answer to that.

¹⁸ Some scholars don't recognise that distinction. They hold that *diakonos* means 'servant', no more or less, and that its use in church circles in NT times was general, with no 'office' implied. Here we go again...!

Then came another question: should all deacons be men, or could women be deacons too?

Well, Phoebe seemed to be one, but was she a formal ‘deacon’ of the church in Cenchreae, or just a ‘servant’ generally?¹⁹ Nobody knows. The general position of our church at that time was not to allow women into leadership positions, so to allow them into the diaconate could, some felt, be the thin end of the wedge. We’d have female elders next, perish the thought! So guess what: our reassessment-study on the role of deacons proved inconclusive, and things rolled along as they had before, which probably owed more to our tradition than anything else.

Today I would ask, ‘Why should we *expect* the New Testament to provide a blueprint for all aspects of church leadership?’ I don’t believe it does, at least not in any detailed way. There simply isn’t in its pages an incontrovertible pattern for who deacons should be and what they should do. So, I’ll happily go along with deacons both male and female, whose role in the church may be administrative and practical, or perhaps more pastoral. The name matters not a jot. It’s the people that count — people who love both Jesus and the church members enough to want to serve them and their interests faithfully and well. How liberating is that!

Example 3: ‘Ephesians 4 ministries’

The ‘manual of church practice’ approach often comes unstuck, too, on the subject of ‘the Ephesians 4 ministries’, sometimes called ‘the ascension ministries’ — apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.²⁰ I’ve had regular trouble trying to sort those out. That we should expect to see gifted people of all these kinds functioning in the

¹⁹ See Romans 16:1.

²⁰ See Ephesians 4:11-13.

church in every era I have no doubt, and their broad roles are fairly clear. But once you get beyond that you are in trouble.

Was Junia a female apostle?²¹ Is an apostle's authority advisory or executive in relation to the authority of local church elders? Indeed, is the concept of 'authority' in church leadership even valid at all? Is pastor/teacher a single role or two separate ones? Can a prophet today legitimately declare, 'Thus says the Lord...'? I suspect the Bible leaves issues like these out of focus, and we ask for trouble if we try to sharpen them up and insist we have the 'right' biblical answer. We don't, because the Bible simply isn't a manual of church practice, except in the very broadest of senses.

...of life skills

Nor is the Bible a *manual of life skills*. Most ordinary Christians don't get embroiled in the type of church issues we have just touched on. But they do want to order their everyday lives in line with God's will and, understandably (but maybe not rightly), they view the Bible as his manual showing them how to do it.

Let's take an example. It is said that 'you are what you eat'. What does the Bible say, then, about what we should eat and drink? What dietary advice does it give? As sincere believers, we want to make every aspect of our lives subject to God's revealed wisdom, don't we? So surely we can expect Scripture to speak loudly and clearly on a basic subject like this?

Well, it may speak loudly, but there is a cacophony of voices all shouting different things, so it certainly doesn't speak clearly. I've met people, for instance, who claim to have had revelation based on the

²¹ Romans 16:7.

experience of Daniel in Babylon.²² As a Jew in exile there, you will recall, he was chosen to be groomed for a top job in the Babylonian diplomatic service, and this gave him privileged access to the very best food and drink the state could offer — the ‘royal food and wine’. But he turned it down and opted instead for ‘nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink’. On this diet he turned out to be the star student of his class, proving that this Daniel Diet is the right one for you and me. Is that ‘what the Bible teaches’? I hope not because I don’t fancy it much.

Another may argue, ‘You can go vegetarian like Daniel if you choose, but there’s no biblical case for making it binding on us all. Jesus ate fish. And as a good Jew he ate lamb every year at the Passover celebration. What’s more, Paul speaks about meat-eating as something that was normal among the Christians in the churches he wrote to. So that settles it: you can be a carnivore and a Christian.’

Fair enough. But I once met a dear Christian man who in all sincerity ruled out pork. It was forbidden under the Old Testament Law, he pointed out. And while it was true that Jesus, later, ‘declared all foods clean’,²³ the fact that for so many centuries it was forbidden must point, he believed, to some hidden dangers in eating it. He thus felt he was obeying Scripture by foregoing bacon sandwiches and pork sausages, poor man.

The fact is, the Bible does not itself claim to be a manual of life skills, dietary or otherwise, so you should be reticent to treat it that way. It does not offer a ‘right’ way to bring up your children, run your business, make yourself beautiful, order your marriage or handle your finances. Sure, it has some wise observations on those and many other

²² See Daniel chapter 1.

²³ Mark 7:19.

matters, but it doesn't offer a unified, fool-proof system. So don't drive yourself crazy trying to find one. All you'll succeed in doing is to fall into a bog of legalism, and before long you will feel pressure to break fellowship with people who have a different 'system' based on the same Bible.

...of doctrinal correctness

You may be OK with what I've said so far, but find yourself unable to go along with those who are saying that the Bible is not a *manual of doctrinal correctness*. I understand how you feel, and would have agreed with you in my earlier days. So let me explain.

By 'doctrine' I mean fundamental beliefs about major topics like the nature of God, the nature of humanity, the work of Christ, and our eternal hope. I do believe that the Bible is our *guide* here, but not in the 'manual of doctrine' sense. It's fair to say, I think, that virtually every major doctrine of the Christian faith has been argued over and disputed by the godliest of people, who have often reached completely opposite conclusions.

'But surely,' you say, 'the Bible has to be clear on doctrine above all things, because, in the end, what we believe governs the way we act and how we live! It's the most vital thing of all!' That's true, but the Bible is simply *not* clear on many key aspects of doctrine, and we deceive ourselves if we think it is. Remember the 9,000 denominations, not to mention the flourishing cults, many of which, like us, claim to base their beliefs on Scripture. Let's consider an example.

What happens when we die?

What happens to us when we die? Since people die every day, it's a commonly-asked question, and you would expect the Bible to be clear on this topic, at least. Alas, it is anything but clear. In fact, it's highly

confusing. Yes, we can safely assume, I'd say, that since God is love, he has something better than this life for us after we die, but beyond that, it gets fuzzy. I'd be interested to know how *you* would answer the question, and the reasons for your answer. But I could safely bet that if I asked ten people for their interpretation of the Bible on this, I'd get at least half a dozen different answers.

'You go either to heaven or to hell,' some would affirm, simplistically. If pressed, though, they would have a tough time backing that up from the Bible. For one thing 'going to heaven when you die' hardly figures in its pages at all. And if by 'hell' they mean – as most evangelicals probably would — everlasting conscious torment in fire and brimstone, that too is hard to substantiate.

We can't go into the ins and outs of that here, but let's suppose, for now, that heaven and hell are indeed the twin options, representing the fate of the righteous and the wicked respectively. Do we, then, enter into one of these the moment we die? The Bible talks clearly about the ultimate *resurrection* of both the righteous and the wicked to face judgment, but that appears to lie in the future, when Jesus returns. Will those who die before that be judged and sentenced immediately, then, *before* the final judgment?

'Ah, no, you're missing the point' says someone else. 'In the New Testament death is referred to as "sleep". So, when we die, it's like going to sleep. When you go to sleep at night, the next thing you know is waking up in the morning. So it's the same with death. We are unconscious as we sleep in death but we "wake up" on resurrection day, and it seems to us that the one leads straight into the other.'

That's an interesting take on the subject, and one currently being propagated by many, who would quote Hebrews: 'People are destined

to die once, and after that to face judgment.’²⁴ There may be hundreds of years between their moment of death and the return of Christ for the final judgment, but to them it seems as if the one immediately follows the other.

‘No, that can’t be right,’ chips in someone else. ‘It overlooks the all-important *intermediate state*, between the moment we die and the final judgment when Jesus returns. Sleeping refers just to the body. The soul/spirit doesn’t sleep; it is eternal and when we die goes to be with Christ, just as Paul says, “...to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.”’²⁵ (Notice how all these conflicting voices quote *selected* Bible verses in support of their claims.)

Many would point out that, if this is the case, we must be with Jesus in some disembodied state because, apparently, we don’t get our new bodies until the resurrection. And being without a body is not greatly appealing to many. But anyway, ‘to depart and be with Christ’ *could* be interpreted to mean that both body and spirit sleep, so that departing and waking up with Christ are experienced as the one immediately after the other.

‘But supposing it’s an unbeliever we’re talking about,’ someone throws in. ‘Where, if anywhere, do *they* go when they die? Is it to *sheol*, maybe, or *hades*? And what exactly does that mean? After all, *gehenna* is the proper word for ‘hell’ as a place of torment, and presumably nobody is dispatched there until the final judgment?’

And so it continues. This conversation could go on for hours — and frequently does. But surely if the Bible were clear on such a vital topic as what happens when we die, we could bottom it out in a couple of minutes? The fact that we can’t, and that the arguments

²⁴ Hebrews 9:27.

²⁵ Philippians 1:23.

have been going on unresolved for two thousand years, says it all: the Bible just *isn't* clear on this one. And there are many other areas of doctrine where it is equally unclear. Here are a few:

- Does God predestine some to salvation and others to perdition?
- Is God both angry and loving at the same time?
- Who did Jesus die for?
- Will there be a literal millennium and, if so, where will it fit in and what will be its nature?
- Does God ever change his mind?
- Is God capable of stopping evil? If he is, why doesn't he do it a lot more often?
- Is the present-day State of Israel a fulfilment of biblical prophecy?
- Did God punish Jesus for our sins?
- What exactly is 'the kingdom of God'?
- Does prayer make any real difference?

Thousands of volumes have been written on these and a stack of other doctrinal issues, drawing a whole variety of conclusions. That's what inevitably happens when you see the Bible as a manual of doctrinal correctness: nobody can agree on what the 'correct' doctrine is! The good news is that you can concede this point and still maintain the conviction that the Bible is divinely inspired, as we shall see.

Think carefully over the ground we have covered so far. It's heavy stuff for many, but it won't go away, so needs to be faced. When you are ready, read on, because there are a couple more things that the Bible is not...

4 - More on What the Bible is Not

The Bible is not a contract

Some Christians see the Bible as a contractual document, spelling out the details of what is expected of the two parties in the contract — God and us. It outlines the privileges for adhering to its requirements, and the penalties for departing from them. It covers a range of ‘what if’ options, and details the action both parties agree to take in each case. The angelic lawyers have been through it with a fine-tooth comb and given it the okay. God has signed it, and by faith so have you, so now you know exactly where you stand.

God’s contractual obligations, on this view, are his ‘promises’. Many a believer has sung with gusto: ‘Every promise in the Book is mine, every chapter, every verse, every line; all are blessings of his love divine. Every promise in the Book is mine.’

That’s a dubious statement. For a start, some picking and choosing is going on, since we assume it’s the ‘nice’ promises we are talking about, not the nasty ones. What about: ‘Unless you repent you will all likewise perish’?²⁶ That sounds like a promise, and it’s Jesus himself making it. But you don’t often find it embroidered in a nice frame above the sofa.

A book of promises?

Leaving that issue aside, we need to examine the assumption that the ‘nice’ promises in Scripture are applicable to all and sundry, on the basis that the ‘contract’ is for all who believe. How about this one:

²⁶ Luke 13:3.

‘Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it’?²⁷

I know lots of good Christian people who took this ‘promise’ as a starting point for raising their kids with sound and godly standards, and with loving discipline. Some have been blessed to see their children grow into adults who walk with God and live good, wholesome lives. But I have to be honest: I have also seen some of the most caring and godly of parents plunged into grief as their kids have kicked over the traces and lived rebellious, dissolute lives with no time for God at all — and in one case died of a heroin overdose.

What went wrong? If God is bound to this contractual promise, he has been slack, to say the least, in fulfilling it. The parents with good kids can say, ‘Yes, we trusted God’s Word on this, and he hasn’t disappointed us, praise him!’ But what about the parents of the tearaways? What can they say? In spite of their best efforts, God has evidently broken his promise and fallen short of his contractual obligations. Naturally, they are reluctant to press such a charge against the Almighty, so they have to come up with some other explanation. Usually it’s ‘Clearly we didn’t do our bit right’, or ‘We didn’t have enough faith’, or both. That’s desperately sad, because they were utterly sincere in doing their very best to raise their kids in a Christian way. What more could they have done? Nothing. So let’s not dodge the obvious question: *has God let them down?*

All this ceases to be an issue if we reject the notion that the Bible is a contractual document. It is in fact no such thing and never claims to be. The verse in Proverbs about child-rearing is one of hundreds of statements in the Old Testament’s wisdom books that are *broadly* true and, as such, shine a helpful light on life in general. But they are not

²⁷ Proverbs 22:6.

intended to be legally-binding contractual undertakings or universal promises from God.

Who is God addressing?

It is the ‘Word of Faith’ people who, perhaps more than most, have pressed this flawed contractual approach to its limit. And the realm of physical healing has been their focus. If you are ill, you go through the contract and find a relevant clause, like ‘I am the LORD, who heals you.’²⁸ Aha! There it is, in black and white, incontrovertible and sure. God himself is speaking. He is, he says, ‘the LORD’, and he then states a key feature of his nature: he heals his people. So there you go. Not even God could legally wriggle out of the obligations explicit in that statement.

But there are two major weaknesses in this approach. For a start, in this verse God is addressing *a particular people*. He is talking to the ancient Israelites. Why should we expect everything he said to them to be valid and relevant to us today? A short scan of the Old Testament will throw up hundreds of statements — even promises — that God made to them but which no Christian today would dream of applying to themselves. So why pick on this ‘healing’ statement and embrace it as our own? Because wishful thinking *wants* it to be applicable to us. Sadly, that’s not a good enough reason.

The second weakness is that God spoke this promise to his ancient people *in particular circumstances*. They had recently left slavery in Egypt and were en route to the Promised Land. Their long journey was through the desert, requiring strength and stamina; weak and sickly folk would not make it. God graciously assured them, therefore, that provided they honoured and obeyed him, he would see

²⁸ Exodus 15:26.

to it that they didn't fall ill in that grim environment. You and I today are not tramping through a Middle Eastern desert. We are not ancient Israelites. Most of us are blessed with good medical services. God's statement was not addressed to us. We can't, therefore, wave this page of the contract in his face, stab our finger at the relevant clause and demand that he clear up our cancer or arthritis right away 'because he has promised'. He simply hasn't.

The plain fact, too, is that this approach just doesn't work. Now don't get me wrong: I believe that God heals today, and I have seen him do so more than once. But he doesn't do it every time. In fact, he doesn't do it most times, if we're frank — we'll come back to this later. But we love and trust him anyway. And that's the point: we are *in relationship* with him, not contractual partners with him like self-interested, hard-nosed businessmen. If we are linked only contractually it follows that, if he seems to be failing in his part of the deal, we just need to get a clever lawyer on the job. He will put pressure on God to get his act together, or will press for full contractual penalties to be imposed on him.

Just to talk this way shows how flawed this approach is. We dare not treat God in such a cold and legal manner. It's our view of the Bible as a contractual document that is to blame. We need to drop it right away. If we don't, tomorrow we'll find ourselves pressing God to prevent our shoes and clothes from wearing out, which he did for Israel in the desert at the same time as keeping them healthy.

The Bible is not a history book

You may agree with the questioning of the 'contractual' approach to the Bible. No wobbles there. But you might have more difficulty with the next point: many today are pointing out that *we should not view the Bible as a history book*.

‘The Bible is not a history book’ is a statement that needs qualifying. The Bible certainly contains *some* historical material — like the story of Abraham, the journey of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan, the kings of Israel, the life of Jesus, and the events of the early church. But even most of that, the scholars are saying, is not what modern Western readers would regard as ‘straight history’, meaning ‘a clinical, objective account of what factually took place’.

The creation accounts in Genesis

Many parts of the Bible were never, from the start, *intended* to be history in that modern sense. Like the six days of creation at the beginning of Genesis. Such passages have important lessons for us, but not as history. If you insist, as some sadly do, on banging the worn-out drum of literal six-day creationism as part of your witness to society around you, you’ll alienate many of them before you start, because they are not daft, and they will think you are. You can believe that God created everything without labelling Genesis chapter one as history.

Studies over the last 150 years have unearthed some remarkable facts that bear on that chapter. For instance, we now know that many ancient peoples contemporary with, or older than, the Israelites had creation and flood stories very similar to the ones in Genesis. They were the typical attempts of these ancient peoples to identify themselves in a confusing world, and to bring some order into their understanding of the universe and their own place and purpose in it. Their gods, of course, figured centrally in these accounts.

The famous Babylonian text, *Enumah Elish*, is a case in point. It has much in common with Genesis 1, but significant differences, too. The Israelites, most scholars believe, framed their own creation account precisely to *differentiate* their God from Babylonian gods like Marduk

— and they did a good job of it. Israel’s God, for instance, unlike the others, isn’t cowed by the might of the sun, moon and stars; it was he who put them in place. He is supremely powerful, simply speaking them into being, along with the rest of the universe.

Nobody is suggesting that the people who put together the creation account in Genesis were somehow copying from the Babylonians. That is most unlikely. But they did share the same ancient, pre-scientific worldview, and they shared the convention of that era of composing ‘myths’ to explain their origins as distinct peoples. Don’t let the word ‘myth’ scare you.²⁹ In this context it doesn’t mean ‘fairy tale’, like Jack and the Beanstalk, or Jason and the Argonauts. It’s a technical term to describe the stories framed by ancient peoples to explain their origins and their place in the world. Genesis is firmly in that category, not in the ‘straight history’ one.

Does that wobble your tower? It need not. Our God — praise him! — is a master at meeting people *where they actually are*, and dealing with them at a level that their generation can grasp and which for them is ‘normal’. Why, then, would he not communicate with ancient Israel at such a level?

History with a bias

You need to be aware, too, that it’s not just Genesis that is not what many have thought. Questions hang over other accounts in the Old Testament, like the Exodus.

There must at some stage have been a movement of some Israelite slaves out of Egypt, but it seems doubtful, the scholars tell us, that it

²⁹ Here is a definition of ‘myth’ in its technical sense: ‘An ancient, premodern, prescientific way of addressing questions of ultimate origins and meaning in the form of stories: Who are we? Where do we come from?’

—Peter Enns, *Inspiration And Incarnation* (Baker Academic, 2005, p46).

was on the massive scale described in the book of Exodus. Outside of the biblical account, there is no evidence that an Egypt-crushing Exodus ever took place. It's the same with the conquest of Canaan after the Israelites had crossed the Jordan. Jericho has been excavated for years with no evidence of its collapsing walls. Indeed, even evangelical scholars are pretty solid now in agreeing that there wasn't a walled city there at all at the time Joshua led the Israelites into the area.

That is a massive block-poke for some. If all this isn't 'straight history', literally factual in every detail, in line with modern historiographical standards, what are we then to make of it? Could it possibly be based on certain real events, but ones that the Bible's authors have given a distinctive slant in order to make a point? Could it be *history with a bias*?

Today we look down on that sort of thing. We despise, for example, those whose version of twentieth-century history questions the reality of the Holocaust. And we rightly despise them, because the evidence for the Holocaust is overwhelming. But in ancient times history wasn't 'done' the way we do it now. What we might frown upon as a 'propaganda element' was part and parcel of every nation's written history. That's just the way people were at that time, and that's just the way they wrote 'history'. And our God, who delights to meet people where they are, not where he would like them to be, had his dealings with the Israelites on that basis.

That need not wobble you. The accounts of the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan are as much 'inspired by God' when seen this way as ever they were when we imagined every detail to be factually correct. These stories have much to teach us, particularly in the way they prepare us for the coming of Jesus and the far greater company that he led out of their slavery to sin and death.

‘OK then. I think I can go along with that for the Old Testament,’ you concede. ‘But I’m just grateful that when we come to the New Testament and the arrival of Jesus we are at last on solid historical ground!’

The four Gospels

Let’s take a look and see. First, there’s no question that Jesus was a real person and that the four Gospels give accounts of his life, ministry, death and resurrection that are factual. But it would be a mistake to regard even the Gospels as ‘straight history’ without any particular slant.

If you want to nit-pick over Gospel facts, you will have to face some thorny issues. We have already mentioned the ‘one Legion or two’ question, but there are many more, like Matthew’s account of how Judas Iscariot died, which doesn’t tally with the account in Acts.³⁰ Or look at the different records of the resurrection of Jesus. If you try to harmonise who did what, who appeared when, how many angels there were, and who said what to whom, you will be hard pressed to do it. They just don’t match up in all the details.

But in a curious way this helps to authenticate the accounts. They are like four people who witnessed a road traffic accident. One was a pedestrian further up the road, one riding his bike in the park adjoining the road, one driving a truck four vehicles back from the accident, and the other a worker on the third floor of an office block who looked out of the window when he heard the bang. We wouldn’t expect their witness-accounts to match up in every detail, because they all had different perspectives. There would be differences — even

³⁰ Matthew 27:5 says that Judas committed suicide by hanging himself. Acts 1:18 says, ‘He fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out.’

contradictions. But together they paint a helpful composite picture of the accident and its aftermath.

New Testament scholars are telling us that the four Gospels are just like that. Each writer tells the story of Jesus with a personal agenda that colours his narrative. Matthew writes chiefly for Jewish readers, for example, and slants his record accordingly. That target readership also determines what he includes and leaves out. He includes, for instance, a lot of Jesus' teaching — and deliberately puts it in five blocks, in a conscious attempt to echo the 'five books of Moses', the Pentateuch, and show how Jesus superseded even the mighty Moses so revered by the Jews. I won't go into the other three Gospel writers, because any standard commentary or New Testament Introduction will provide all the information you need on their approaches.

But I'll just mention John's Gospel briefly. Had you realised that he portrays Jesus as being crucified on a different day from the other three Gospels?

If you're going to impose modern Western historiographical standards on him, you will be disappointed. John, unlike the others, has the crucifixion taking place on the day of preparation of the annual Passover festival. That's when the Passover lambs were killed, which fitted nicely with John's portrayal of Jesus as 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'. He was making a point, emphasising that Jesus was the fulfilment of everything that the Old Testament Passover had foreshadowed. We tend to frown on such 'tinkering with the facts', as we see it, but in John's day that wasn't frowned on at all. It's the way people always wrote history: they adjusted it to make a point.

You may have noticed another feature of John's Gospel that doesn't fit with the others: his treatment of 'the cleansing of the

temple' by Jesus, when he barged in and overturned the money-changers' tables.

Matthew, Mark and Luke place this incident at the tail-end of Jesus' ministry, where it becomes one of the factors that firmed up the opposition of the Jewish authorities. But John puts it in his second chapter, right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. What's more, he lengthens it to include a debate between Jesus and the religious leaders. Why does John do this? It is clear from his Gospel as a whole that he is strong on emphasising the authority of Jesus, and particularly how that authority put the alleged authority of those leaders in the shade. Placing the cleansing of the temple right at the start establishes that point early on, and John can then build on it as he goes along, which he does.

It's no good saying, 'But wait a minute, when did it *really* take place? Was it at the beginning or at the end?' Almost certainly at the end, most would say. Others, desperate not to allow John to tweak history the way he seems to have done, conclude that there must have been two such cleansings, one at the beginning and the other at the end. That is most unlikely. Let's just face the fact that John did what, in his day, would be totally normal: he altered the order of events to make a point — a valid point. That's all we need to know, and it shouldn't be allowed to rock your boat and undermine your confidence in the Bible as God's Word.

God meets people where they are

Some would label such items as those above as 'errors' in Scripture. That's not a helpful term. They are simply reflections of the real world of the time and the way people thought, acted and wrote. God met them *where they were*, as children of their time, and their writings bear all the hallmarks of it. *What you have to get over is seeing this as a problem.*

For myself, I've come to see it as deeply reassuring. It tells me that the God I love and serve relates to me as I am, in the time and culture in which I live. He is real to me here and now, just as he was to the Israelites way back BC and to John in the first century AD.

In my library I have several books with titles like *Encyclopedia Of Biblical Difficulties*. The underlying philosophy of these books is that if the Bible is inspired by God and thus 'God's Word', it cannot possibly contain any real errors, contradictions or ambiguities, only apparent ones. These books therefore attempt to explain them away — and often do a poor job of it. Far better, I believe, to let the Bible be the product of its own time and culture, and not lay upon it expectations of conformity to the modern mind-set.

That way, you can cope with John's handling of the time of the temple-cleansing and the day of the crucifixion. You can accept that Genesis gives two creation accounts, one in each of the first two chapters, and that the two don't tally in their order of events. You can sleep without worrying about King Manasseh who, according to 2 Kings 21, was evil from start to finish, one of the worst kings God's people ever had, but who, according to 2 Chronicles 33, had an end-of-life turn-around, repenting and undoing many of his idolatrous works. And you can smile and dismiss the apostle Paul's lack of political correctness in writing off all Cretans as 'liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons'.³¹

There are many problematic passages like these in the Bible. Face it. Scripture is inspired by God, yes, but it is, at the same time, an intensely human book, with the features of a less-than-perfect humanity all over it. That's the way God ordained it to be, and that's the way you should accept it. If *he* was happy to accommodate himself

³¹ Titus 1:12-13.

to human weakness, you can safely go along with it. This may alter the way you use the Bible from now on. But there's no reason why it should topple your tower or throw your Christian commitment into doubt.

The Bible is not a science textbook

So much for history. Now what about science? Some of the Bible's ideas will be particularly hard to accept if you insist that it must be scientifically accurate in its every statement.

Have you noticed, for instance, that it makes no reference to male infertility? If a married couple had no children, people in Bible times assumed the problem to be with the wife, who was 'barren'. Today we know a great deal about the mechanics of conception, and realise that the problem could lie with either the husband or the wife. That is the scientific reality. I have had arguments with Christians who, naïvely regarding the Bible as the last word on everything, deny that there is such a thing as male infertility. This is not the way to go!

Another case in point is how the universe is constructed, and where the Earth fits into it. Today we know that Planet Earth is a tiny pinprick of matter in a remote corner of a universe so vast that it boggles the mind. It circles the sun which, even though far bigger than Earth, is still a very small item in the universe at large.

I say the Earth 'circles the sun.' That fact is well-established and no-one in their right mind denies it. But for centuries people believed that it was vice versa: the sun went round the Earth. Of course, from a human perspective it does: we see it disappear in the west each night and rise again in the east the following morning. We ourselves haven't moved, so the sun must have! It's a matter of perception.

What does the Bible say? Well, it often mentions the sun rising and setting, and it's fair to assume that people in Bible times, if they

thought about it, assumed a geocentric view, namely, that the earth is at the centre, with the sun revolving round it. And that view prevailed well into more recent centuries, until scientists like Copernicus, in the early sixteenth century, showed from their researches that the earth goes round the sun.

Some Christians at the time didn't like that idea. They were convinced that Scripture taught otherwise. Even the great Martin Luther expressed his opposition. 'People give ear,' he declared, 'to an upstart astrologer who strove to show that the earth revolved, not the heavens or the firmament, the sun or the moon... This fool wishes to reverse the entire science of astronomy; but the sacred Scripture tells us that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still and not the earth.'³²

You can make of the Joshua reference what you will, but the point is that 'Bible-believers' in Luther's day felt they had a solid scriptural case for a geocentric universe. We can't blame them for concluding that this was what, in their view, 'the Bible teaches', but they were wrong to reject the hard scientific facts, which show that the Earth circles the sun.

Is the Bible, then, scientifically wrong? On this particular point, yes, of course it is. But the point is that it doesn't matter one bit, because it would be foolish to assert that 'the Bible *teaches* a geocentric universe'. It doesn't 'teach it'. It simply records the earthly journey of people who understandably did see the universe that way. God met those people as they were, as the product of their time and culture, with their limited understanding of topics like this.

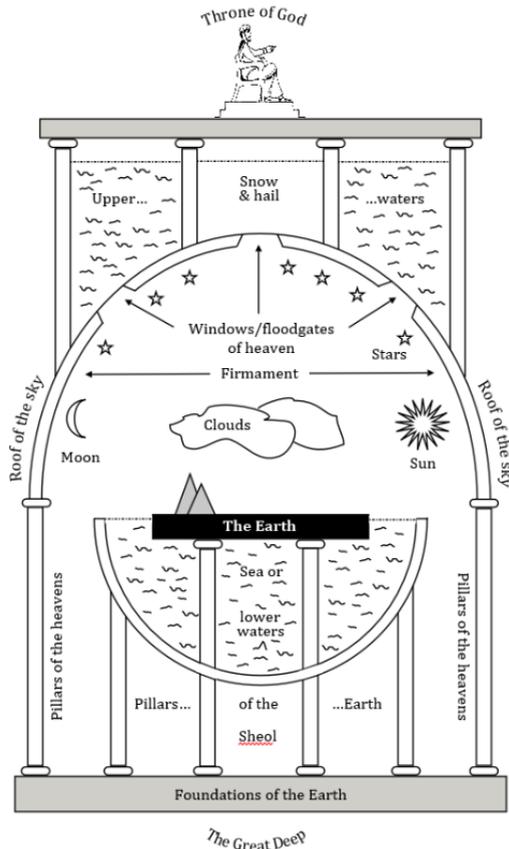
³² A reference to Joshua 10:13. The quotation is from Luther's *Table Talk*.

Ancient cosmology

In Old Testament times there was a fairly standard view of how the earth fitted into the bigger picture, and the diagram below explains it.

Read your Old Testament, particularly Genesis, with that diagram in front of you, and you will see that this is indeed the biblical picture.

In light of what we know about the universe today, it is totally wrong. The sky isn't a kind of glass dome with stars stuck on it and



openable windows through which, when God chooses, water can pass through as rain onto the earth below. There are no pillars holding up

the flat disk of the earth. But we can certainly see how ancient peoples, with their earthbound viewpoint and lack of scientific instruments, would arrive at that conclusion. And it doesn't make a scrap of difference to the things that really matter: the reality of God and our union with him through Jesus Christ.

So, let's decide to be wary of saying things like, 'The Bible *teaches...*', because it never claims to be a compendium of factual material on every topic it mentions. By all means say, 'The Bible *says...*', because it does. But that's not to say that it 'teaches' a particular line — and it certainly doesn't on scientific matters. The biblical authors, as people of their time, brought to their observations the worldview of their day. We ourselves live much later in history and we have a far greater understanding of just about everything, including cosmology. Rejoice in this again: *God meets us where we are*, just as he met them where they were. This isn't a tower-wobbling issue.

Many would say that evolution — including the emergence of *homo sapiens* — has as solid a scientific undergirding today as Copernicus's heliocentric views had five hundred years ago. That's a big issue for some, so we'll give it a chapter of its own a little later.

5 - What the Bible Is

We have taken some time to establish what the Bible is *not*, so now let's consider what it *is*, and in what sense we can call it 'the Word of God'.

What is the Bible? Two answers are prominent these days: *story* and *wisdom*. We will look at them in turn.

The Bible as 'story'

The Bible is primarily a *story*. Latch onto that, because it's fundamental. I don't, of course, mean 'story' in the sense of fiction, but in the sense of a running account of things that happened.

The Bible is a story of how God loved his creatures so much that he gave them the liberty they needed if they were to love him freely in return. It records their abuse of that liberty, and the resulting corruption of the whole natural order. Then it moves into its main theme: the steps God has taken to mend the broken situation, culminating in Jesus.

That's what the Bible is all about. It's a gloriously rambling collection of disparate items, united by their contribution to this overall saga. There's poetry in there, and history, and legal stuff, and letters, and proverbs — and lots more. Together, they reflect the actions and reactions of folk who, in their own time and way, knew God and walked their personal journey in the light of that. All were men and women of their era, with the background, worldview, assumptions and aspirations of their generation. They were not perfect people! But their bits of the story were, to change the metaphor, pieces of the jigsaw puzzle which, viewed after completion, shows the whole picture of God's persistent love and faithfulness

towards a wayward people whom he was determined to draw back to himself, putting both them and their world to rights.

So learn to look at the Bible that way. Whichever section you focus on, it's a window onto just one stage in his people's journey of faith, from which you can learn much to help you in your own. Like you, they sometimes surged forward as if on the crest of a wave; at other times they limped along, wounded, broken and puzzled. Like you, they sometimes looked back to get their bearings again, or looked around to see how others were getting along, or peered into the future to try and determine where exactly it was all heading.

If the 'story' aspect is as central as this, it's vital that we read the Bible accordingly. That will usually mean spending less time on details, or unpacking a single verse, or getting a blessed thought to see you through the day. There's a place for such things, of course, but only if they are seen *in the light of the bigger picture*. You can pick up a single jigsaw piece, hold it to the light and examine it with care. You can note the colours and the shape of the ins and outs along its edges. It may even be quite beautiful. But it really only makes sense when clicked into place in the finished puzzle.

A failure to approach the Bible in the 'bigger picture' way leads to getting details out of proportion. We end up building major doctrines on minor passages, and that's dangerous. And, I might add, it's one of the reasons for some of those 9,000 denominations. Determine, therefore, to keep the whole story of Scripture in mind at all times.

Looking at the Bible this way means you will no longer be able to view it as a 'how to' manual. The genres of 'story' and 'how to manual' are incompatible. So just because something is in the Bible doesn't *necessarily* mean you should emulate it, or urge it upon others. It may well just be something that a Bible character or writer said or

did as part of their experience of God centuries ago, but which is irrelevant to you in your walk with God in the twenty-first century.

The Law, for example, required teenagers who swore at their parents to be put to death. It's in the Bible, but you would be in big trouble if you tried to practise that today — and rightly so. The same would apply if you beat your child with a rod.³³ That might have been acceptable at an earlier stage of the 'story', but we have thankfully moved on now.

The Bible as 'wisdom'

I used to preach regularly at a church who, after one of my sermons, stopped inviting me. Why? Because of a remark I made about a Bible verse we mentioned earlier: 'Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.'³⁴

I pointed out, as an aside, that this comes from the part of the Bible usually classified as 'wisdom literature', which includes the book of Proverbs. That book is loaded with pithy, helpful observations about life and how to act in certain circumstances. But, far from being a 'how to' manual, it often gives contradictory advice, and it's up to us which aspect we apply in a given situation. That's where 'wisdom' is required.

I could give a host of examples of these contradictions, but the classic example comes in two consecutive verses:

'Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him' (22:4).

'Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes' (22:5).

³³ Deuteronomy 21:18-21; Proverbs 23:13.

³⁴ Proverbs 22:6

We all know the situation. Some loud-mouthed know-it-all starts pontificating in your hearing. What should you do? Is it best to restrain yourself from commenting and just walk away? After all, if you pitch in with your own ideas to put him straight, some standing by are going to see you as being as opinionated as him. Or should you, in a noble attempt to help the fool out of his illusions of omniscience, challenge his statements?

Clearly, it will depend on who the fool is, whether or not you judge him likely to punch you in the nose for engaging him, whether you are likely to see him again or not — and a host of other factors. Neither of the Proverbs statements is applicable in *every* situation; wisdom lies in making a sensible choice in the circumstances.

The folk at the church I mentioned didn't take kindly to my suggestion that the 'Train up a child...' verse was fine as a general statement, but that we shouldn't expect it to be true in every case. They couldn't cope with the need to exercise wisdom in that regard. For them, the Bible was a 'how to' manual dropped divinely from the sky, so the verse had to be universally applicable — even in the face of evidence to the contrary.

Biblical scholar Peter Enns has presented a solid case for regarding *the whole Bible* as 'wisdom literature'.³⁵ It doesn't often provide universally applicable guidance on how to speak or act in certain circumstances, but provides a variety of often-contradictory insights, and then trusts us to lean on God for wisdom to know what is applicable when.

Enns shows how, as Israel's circumstances changed, they were forced to adapt their understanding of God and his requirements in the light of it. They even set aside parts of the revered Law of Moses,

³⁵ P. Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2019)

received from God himself on Mount Sinai, as circumstantial changes forced the nation to ‘reimagine God’. This is the story of the entire Bible, especially in the radical transition from Old Testament to New with the coming of Jesus.

In the two thousand years since Jesus’ day, and the writings of Peter, John, Paul and James, our world has changed even more radically. Why, then, do so many evangelicals lock themselves into the first century AD and fail to make ‘wisdom’ choices, in light of the fact that ‘our God is marching on’ and, at the same time, moving us, too, forward by his Spirit?

I wish I had known all this when trying to sort out the role of deacons or HGLs — let alone a host of other situations where trying to pin down ‘the Bible’s teaching’ nearly drove me crazy because of the many conflicting angles it presented. My belief that the New Testament, in particular, was the last word on everything had me seriously hamstrung.

But better to gain these insights in my old age than not at all. So, here I am urging those of you who are younger than me (which, alas, is most people these days) to save yourself the same hassle. Shake off the shackles of unrealistic bondage to ‘what the Bible says’. Instead, treat this beloved book as the *story* that it is, and look to the Holy Spirit for *wisdom* in applying its often-contradictory commands. You can do that without throwing out your conviction that it is divinely inspired.

Ah, yes, ‘inspired’. That’s a topic we need to examine more closely.

Inspiration

Christians down the centuries have unanimously regarded the Bible as ‘inspired’, by which they mean that God somehow oversaw its production. As Paul puts it, ‘All Scripture is God-breathed’.³⁶

There have been different views on how he did that — how God interacted with the human authors. At one extreme are those who imagine that an author would be ‘taken over’ by the Holy Spirit. So a Jeremiah, a David, a John or Paul is sitting relaxing one day when he begins to feel a bit strange. His eyes go all glassy as a faraway look comes over his face. Like an automaton, he finds himself reaching for a stylus and he starts writing — page after page. Then the strangeness lifts and he comes back to normality with a jolt, looking in astonishment at the writing before him. ‘Wow, did I write that?’ he asks. He reads it over and can’t remember writing a word of it. But of course, that’s because it was the Holy Spirit, not him, doing the writing.

With respect, anybody who believes that will believe anything. No, all the evidence shows that the human authors of Scripture wrote consciously and intentionally, with their own style and background. And because they were human, it’s easy to imagine David, say, doing several drafts of a new psalm till he was satisfied that it sounded the way he wanted. Some of the Old Testament writers and compilers included material drawn from extra-biblical sources like the Book of Jashar, quoted in Joshua chapter 10. Luke put his material together rather like a student doing a research project, accumulating data from various different sources, then organising it into what he felt was the best order, before writing it out in its final form.³⁷ Paul was a travelling

³⁶ 2 Timothy 3:16.

³⁷ See Luke 1:1-4.

evangelist and church-planter who wrote letters to the growing number of Christian congregations he had links with. His letters were mostly penned to address real-life situations that had cropped up in those churches. It's highly unlikely that, when he wrote, he was conscious of writing Scripture.

So, the Bible's authors wrote as real people, with all their human traits, but we believe that somehow *God was at work overseeing the whole project* to ensure that, when it was done, it served his intended purpose. And what was that? To provide a story — there's that word again — of his people's pilgrimage with him so that later generations, like us, who would follow in their footsteps long after their death, could understand what he had been up to from the start.

What the mechanics were of this process of inspiration we will never know, and we don't need to. But the Holy Spirit, who didn't overrule the writing-style or personality of the Bible's human authors, clearly didn't overrule their limitations or shortcomings either. That is evident from the examples we looked at earlier, and others of the same kind. God accommodated himself to their imperfections, but he did so in such a way that the record he wanted us to inherit from them was in no way robbed of its ability to show us his will and his way. I personally find that deeply encouraging. It means that God can use an imperfect you and me to serve his purpose as well!

Try to find a place of peace in that. It may help you to compare the Bible in this respect with Jesus. Jesus was the divine Son of God; but because he was also truly human, he displayed human traits: sometimes he got tired, for example, or exasperated with his slow-to-learn disciples. In the same way you can hold firmly to your conviction that the Bible is inspired by God while, at the same time, facing up to the limitations of its human authors that come out in its pages.

Infallible? Inerrant?

This is not the place to go into detailed arguments for the inspiration of Scripture. There are books galore that you can refer to on that subject. We do need, however, to look at certain aspects of the doctrine of Scripture where some block-poking is currently going on.

Evangelicals have commonly used the terms ‘infallible’ and ‘inerrant’ to describe the Bible. These mean different things. ‘Infallible’ means it *doesn’t mislead* the reader. That’s probably an acceptable claim. But remember what we said earlier about the ‘perspicuity’ of the Bible — the notion that any ordinary reader can, through reading it, arrive at the truth. The plain fact is that many have read it and reached wrong conclusions entirely. A few hundred years ago many Americans, for example, supported the slave trade on the grounds that both the Old Testament and the New give slavery the OK. And the Dutch settlers in southern Africa, Christians all, genuinely believed that they were justified in killing the native black population and taking over their land. They saw themselves as new Israelites colonising a new Canaan, and felt that the Bible approved of their exterminating the native inhabitants. The Bible clearly didn’t prove to be infallible there!

Of course, you are saying to yourself that it isn’t the Bible itself that’s misleading, it’s the faulty way the Americans and Dutch interpreted it. You may well be right. But that doesn’t alter the fact that, if the Bible is open to such deadly misinterpretation, it can hardly be classified as infallible. Maybe, then, we should settle for saying that it is infallible only when correctly interpreted. That sounds good. The only problem then is deciding what ‘correctly’ means, and there are a multitude of views on that, so we’re not much further forward.

The other term commonly used is ‘inerrant’, which means *free from error*. The Bible, on this view, has no mistakes in it. It means exactly what it says, whether it is talking about our doctrine, about the way we should order our lives, or events like the creation accounts in Genesis, the story of the Exodus or the conversion of evil King Manasseh. Many sincere evangelicals today think the case for inerrancy is open to serious question.

How the belief in inerrancy came to prominence is interesting. For a long time, evangelical Christians believed the Bible to be God’s inspired Word without defining what exactly that meant. Then, in the nineteenth century, liberal scholars began to cast doubt on many aspects of the Bible’s integrity. This naturally provoked a defensive reaction among evangelicals, who worked hard to build a strong case for their traditional position. As often happens in such circumstances, they tended to *over-react*. And they did so by insisting that every single word, every letter of the Bible was one hundred percent reliable, meaning exactly *and literally* what it said, no more and no less. The Bible doesn’t even claim that for itself, but its defenders felt it had to be all or nothing.

Many Christians, especially in the USA (which is where the battle mainly took place), still stand by inerrancy. But it is fading fast, and in my view rightly so, because it is an unsustainable position in light of the hard facts. The Bible is marked by the kind of contradictions and time-bound errors we mentioned earlier. Much of its history is biased, as we saw. It speaks with many voices on the same subject in ways that can’t be easily reconciled. But the good news is that it remains the Word of God! So, if what I have just said is a tower-wobbler for you, remind yourself that you have abandoned the tower approach to faith. Your relationship with God is unaffected.

The Word of God

If we are sceptical about inerrancy, then, and even a bit doubtful about infallibility, in what sense can we say that the Bible is the Word of God?

The bottom line is that we believe God fixed it the way it is *so that we could understand his plan and purpose* — which is all about Jesus Christ — and fall into line with that plan. The fact that he chose to do it through imperfect writers is neither here nor there.

Jesus and the Bible are in an interlocking relationship with each other. He grew up in a Jewish environment where the Old Testament was universally considered to be God's Word. He put his personal stamp of approval on it when, for example, in his desert temptations each time he answered the devil with 'It is written...' and quoted it. Later he accused the Pharisees of replacing the Old Testament Scriptures with their own practices: 'You nullify the *word of God* by your traditions,' he said.³⁸ And he saw the Old Testament as carrying a divine imperative that shaped his own ministry, so that he could say to the two dispirited disciples on the road to Emmaus, 'Did not the Messiah *have* to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' Then Luke goes on: 'And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said *in all the Scriptures* concerning himself.'³⁹ That last statement is a key one. It reminds us that the whole Bible, Old Testament as well as the more obvious New, is centred on Jesus. Everything else about it is secondary to that.

The New Testament, of course, was written in the generation after Jesus' death and resurrection. But it still carried his stamp of approval. The four Gospels record his very own words and deeds, including his

³⁸ See Mark 7:6-13.

³⁹ Luke 24:25-27.

statement that his words were the only reliable foundation to build our lives upon.⁴⁰ As for the apostles who gave us the rest of the New Testament, they had Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit would guide them in their endeavours.⁴¹

These few pointers, among the many we could have chosen, suffice to confirm us in our conviction that we believe the Bible to be God's Word because Jesus affirmed it. At the same time, we believe Jesus to be who he claimed to be because of what the Bible says about him.

'Wait a minute,' you say. 'That's arguing in a circle!' Yes, it most certainly is, but this is a self-authenticating circle, and we thus make no apologies. Faith always has to jump into some circle somewhere. This particular circle has had ripples of blessing flowing out from it as people over the centuries since Jesus have jumped in, so we don't hesitate to follow them.

Yes, we believe the Bible to be God's Word. We don't over-egg the pudding with exaggerated and unrealistic claims of infallibility or inerrancy, but we do believe it is more than sufficient to get us into a true understanding of Jesus, and the Father he revealed, and to find 'life to the full' as a result.

From that sound position, in the next chapter we will zoom in on one controversial topic that exposes inerrancy, and grapple with the vexed subject of the Bible versus science.

⁴⁰ Luke 6:46-49.

⁴¹ John 14:25-26; 15:26-27.

6 - Evolution and its Implications

A quick recap before we move on...

In the great order of priorities God comes first, with his original creative work and his later redemptive work in Jesus Christ.⁴² The next big thing, from your personal perspective, is that you have come to know him.

Then, and only then, there's the Bible. It is God's inspired record of his courtship of erring humanity and, as such, is of immense value to us Christians. In third place it may be, but it's very important.

We have concluded that it was never intended to be the 'how to' manual of church practice, doctrine or life-skills that some have tried to make it; that it isn't a contract we can use to browbeat God into doing things for us; and that it isn't a science or history textbook but a document reflecting the worldviews and lifestyles of its ancient compilers. Knowing all this frees us from the kind of bondage to the Bible that has produced untold division and often made Christian people unattractive to outsiders.

We have cast doubts on the inerrancy claims made by some hardliners. We have even expressed some misgivings about the Bible's infallibility. But we have satisfied ourselves that, in spite of all this, it is indeed God's Word, sufficient to bring us into relationship with him through Jesus, who is the Bible's focus.

Now we look at how, in the light of all this, we should view the opening chapters of Genesis. Are they 'scientifically accurate'? We do this because of the present widespread block-poking on this sensitive

⁴² That redemptive work in fact took place 'from the creation of the world'. See Revelation 13:8; 1 Peter 1:19-20.

subject. We looked earlier at the Bible's geocentric view of the solar system. We concluded that, in light of what scientific discovery has revealed, we can accept today's heliocentric view without feeling that, by doing so, we have to ditch the entire Bible.

Today's big issue, of course, is not whether the sun goes round the earth or vice versa. It is *evolution*.

Some Christians get as steamed up about this as their sixteenth-century ancestors did about the other. And the time will come, I'm sure, when evolution is as universally accepted by Christians as the views of Copernicus. My advice would be to save yourself a lot of hassle by facing up to it here and now. But I'll understand if you need to feel your way gently in that direction.

If you are looking for a deep scientific treatise here, you will be disappointed. Like most people, I'm not a scientist and so have to rely, first, on what scientists discover and, second, on the assessment of it by people who combine sincere Christian faith with enough grasp of science to be able to distinguish the wheat from the chaff — plus the ability to express it in language simple enough for you and me to understand. Happily, there are a fair few of them. And, from what I've read of their works, I comfortably accept that — in the wake of God's creative act — macro-evolution is indeed responsible for the multiplication of species, including the human race as we now know it. The way God is and acts, I believe, caused it to be that way.

Grappling with Genesis

If we allow this, even as a possibility, we have to accept that *we can't take the early chapters of Genesis literally*.

Many fine Christians down the centuries have reached that conclusion anyway, including (as far back as the third and fourth centuries AD) the likes of Origen, Tertullian, Athanasius and Gregory

of Nyssa. The great Augustine of Hippo wrote at length on the subject, early in the fifth century AD, in a piece called *The Literal Meaning Of Genesis*. He concluded that it is unwise to read that book as a factual account. So, if you share that view, you are in good company. Not that Augustine and the others believed in evolution, of course; that alternative didn't become known until Darwin published his *On The Origin Of Species* in 1859. But they had the insight to realise that Genesis was providing something other than a literal, blow-by-blow account of the original creation. So let's consider what it might be instead — and we'll extend our enquiries to the Pentateuch⁴³ at large, to look at its authorship and its intention.

For a long time, it was believed that the Pentateuch was written personally by Moses, sometime in the second millennium BC. But few believe that now.

The opening of Deuteronomy, for example, suggests that it is *about* Moses and what he said, not necessarily *by* him. Indeed, the first verse indicates that it was written by somebody who had crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land and was thus writing about Moses in the past tense, since Moses died before the Israelites entered the land. There are references to his death in Deuteronomy 34, where the phraseology points to the book's having been written long after him.⁴⁴ Scholars both Jewish and Christian — including Jerome as long ago as the fifth century AD — surmised that the Pentateuch was put together around Ezra's time — that is, after Judah's return from exile in Babylon, many centuries after Moses. Yes, Moses no doubt contributed parts

⁴³ The collective name for the first five books of the Bible.

⁴⁴ Note the phrase 'to this day' in v6, and 'never since' in v10.

of the writings that were later compiled to form the Pentateuch,⁴⁵ but he was certainly not the primary author.

Similar timing-clues appear elsewhere in the Pentateuch, including in Genesis. In Genesis 12:6, for instance, which refers to Abram's travels in Canaan, we read, '*At that time* the Canaanites were in the land.' This suggests that they weren't there when the author wrote those words, which must have been after the Canaanites had been largely subjugated or destroyed. That means after David's time, a thousand years after Moses. Certainly, it seems ridiculous to imagine that Moses himself wrote, 'Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth' (Numbers 12:3). If he wrote that, he wasn't very humble at all!

Factors like these have led Christian scholars to a sensible conclusion: the Pentateuch is a collection of ancient documents by several authors (including Moses), compiled from various sources into its current form over a long period, and brought to a conclusion by editors who worked after the return from exile. Those editors were guided, it seems, by their desire to give the Israelites a sense of their long-term relationship with God as his special people, and so to ground them firmly in their national history. That view makes a lot of sense. I personally have no problem accepting it as the Pentateuch's likely source without needing to jettison my conviction that it remains God's revelation.

The Jews of Jesus' day, as far as we can see, probably believed that Moses had written all five books personally. Their tradition had taught them that, and they had no reason to question it. Jesus was a

⁴⁵ See for instance Exodus 24:4; Deuteronomy 31:9, 24.

Jew of his time, and so presumably believed the same: he quotes the Pentateuch with phrases like ‘Moses said...’.⁴⁶

To some there is an alarming implication here. ‘Are you suggesting,’ they ask, ‘that Moses didn’t personally write all of the Pentateuch, even though Jesus likely believed he did?’ Yes, is the honest answer. In his incarnational humanity Jesus experienced the limitations that all humanity experiences. He got hungry and tired, for instance, and he lived with *the worldview of his period*, including its angle on the Pentateuch. The fact that he was, at the same time, the Son of God is irrelevant to this issue. In being ‘made in human likeness’ he became a man of his times, and that need cause you no problems. Your salvation is not in doubt. God had his hand on the whole thing!

Why the Pentateuch was written

Now let’s return to the *purpose* for which the Pentateuch in general, and Genesis in particular, was written. That will then bring us back to the creation accounts and the evolution issue.

We sometimes forget what a disaster the exile of Judah to Babylon was for its victims. The Jerusalem temple — the focus of their worship and the dwelling place of God — had been razed to the ground. The city itself lay in ruins, with its key citizens dragged off to Babylon. The promises of God, it seemed, had failed. There was no descendant of David on the throne. Indeed, there was no throne for anyone to sit on. God had deserted them and had let them be routed by Gentile invaders. Where did that leave them? Did they still have a meaningful identity as ‘the people of God’, and a future with him?

⁴⁶ E.g. Mark 7:10; John 5:45-46.

The problem didn't go away when a remnant of Jews returned from exile after seventy years. True, they rebuilt the temple — albeit a smaller version — and got the Levitical worship going again. But they remained under Gentile rule even in their own land, and the future looked bleak. In that sense, their 'exile' was still not really over. Would things ever improve?

Scholars are of the broad opinion that it was largely to answer such questions that what we call the Old Testament was brought together, under divine direction, partly from existing sources and partly by the creation of new documents. Its purpose was to remind the Jews of their glorious past and thus provide a foundation for them to build on. It assured them that, in spite of the appalling setbacks they had suffered, they were still the people of God. As one scholar summarises it: 'The creation of the Hebrew Bible...is *an exercise in national self-definition in response to the Babylonian exile.*'⁴⁷ They were saying, 'This is who we are, this is the God we worship, and on this basis we can move forward.'

We must look at Genesis in this light. Earlier, we noted the way ancient peoples commonly compiled accounts to explain their origins. Genesis, and particularly its creation stories, are Israel's version of such an account. We should look at Genesis from that perspective, the scholars insist, and not from a modern, scientific one. To confuse the two approaches would be as inappropriate as confusing a Shakespeare sonnet with a textbook of advanced mathematics. They are two different genres.

⁴⁷ Enns, Peter. *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn't Say about Human Origins* (Brazos Press, 2012, p27).

Order out of chaos

One key feature of such ancient accounts — we noted above the Babylonian one called *Enuma Elish* — is that they describe how order was formed out of chaos. On that basis, the creation account in Genesis 1 should be seen, not as describing creation *ex nihilo*, but as the way God *brought order out of the chaos that already existed*. Sure, you can believe that God did create originally from nothing,⁴⁸ but that is not what Genesis is describing. We are not here looking at scientific data. We are looking at Israel's convictions about their God, what he is like and what he has achieved.

What he is like is very different from the gods portrayed in similar ancient origin-stories. Israel's God is all-powerful, bringing order out of the primordial chaos simply because he chose to do so. He did not consult any other gods, because he was without equal. Some of the other ancient stories show the sun, moon and stars as themselves gods, but for Israel's God they are objects, no more, which he put in place as he wished. These factors alone set Israel's origin-story apart from those of other nations that we know about; it presents a distinct and altogether superior God.

Then comes Genesis 2, which presents a different creation account from chapter one. The differences are major ones. Some Christians have struggled hard to 'reconcile' the two accounts — which is necessary only if you view them as factual, scientific accounts, which

⁴⁸ Some would deduce this from, for instance, John 1:3 and Colossians 1:16. But others don't accept *creatio ex nihilo*—creation out of nothing—at all. They would hold, instead, that creating is part of God's eternal nature and that, therefore, he has always been creating, and always will be. On that view, he brought our current world and universe into being out of the remnants of a previous creation, of which we know little or nothing. The opening chapters of Genesis are certainly capable of fitting such a scenario. For more on this, see Thomas Jay Oord, *God Can't Q&A* (SacraSage, 2020), chapter 6.

they are not. Certainly, whoever was responsible for compiling the early chapters of Genesis was comfortable to let the two accounts sit side by side without feeling any need to make them more amenable to each other. That's a bit like the two verses in Proverbs on answering a fool — both are true, but with different emphases and applicability. It's a 'wisdom' thing.

Just as the first account shares features and style with *Enuma Elish*, the second one has parallels with an ancient Mesopotamian document called the *Atrahasis Epic*. This, like Genesis, has much to say about the first humans, the growth of the population, and a great flood. Here we will focus on the Adam connection.

Both accounts describe the creation, from dust, of humans, who are then given the breath of life. Both have woman being made from the man's rib or side. Both have a plant that confers immortality. Both have nakedness covered. And more besides. Nobody knows whether one of these stories influenced the other, and it doesn't really matter. What does matter is that both reflect an ancient way of looking at origins that is pre-scientific, and it is thus inappropriate to try to give factual, scientific status to either account. The Genesis account stands as part of God's revealed Word and tells us much about the human condition that is relevant today. But it is a *theological* statement, not a scientific one.

You might need to pause and let that sink in. And don't worry that your Christian friends might call you a heretic if you admit to such views. Just tell them that to be a follower of Jesus does not mean being anti-science, and that you're on a journey of discovery, on which you're having to reconsider some of your long-held opinions. And continue to love them, even if they don't love you.

A world in working order

If the opening chapters of Genesis, then, are not a scientific description of the original creation, what are they describing?

Scholars know, from studying the literature of ancient peoples, that they were more interested in *function* than material origins — what things were *for*, and how they fitted into the bigger picture. They also know that the Hebrew word *bara'* — translated 'created' in Genesis 1:1 and ten times more in that book, plus instances in the rest of the Old Testament — is more to do with establishing function than with material origins. That, it seems, is what is going on here.

Creation need not always be about *material* origins. Today, a college principal might 'create' a curriculum, or a managing director 'create' a committee. Both manipulate existing people, places, materials and time-slots in order to fulfil a specific *function*. That is what Genesis is about. Genesis 1 and 2 are not an account of an original creation.

When God began his work, as described in Genesis 1, everything was chaotic, unproductive and non-functional. That was about to change: 'Cosmic creation in the ancient world was not viewed primarily as a process by which matter was brought into being, but as a process by which functions, roles, order, jurisdiction, organisation and stability were established.'⁴⁹ So, on Day One God established *time*, defined by alternating periods of light and darkness. On Day Two he sorted out cosmic space to create the functions that make possible what we call *weather*, in particular controls on rain, without which human life is impossible. And on Day Three he sorted out

⁴⁹ John H. Walton, *The Lost World Of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology And The Origins Debate* (IVP Academic, 2009. Kindle loc 484).

terrestrial space — separating land from sea — to provide a place where *food* can be grown.

The remaining three days are where God, having established the appropriate environment, put what we might call *functionaries* in place there. He started, on Day Four, with the sun, moon and stars, to which he assigned time-governing functions. On Day Five he established the role of sea-creatures and birds: to be fruitful and multiply and, by so doing, to fill their respective realms. Day Six extended this mandate to land-creatures. But *people* were assigned an additional function: since God had made them uniquely in his own image, they were to *govern the rest of the natural order on his behalf*.

God commanded, and it was done. In these six steps the original chaos became a fully-functioning, working system.

Genesis 2 offers a different account, where the focus is on Adam and Eve. Today, as we noted, many Bible scholars see these as archetypal figures representing human beings everywhere. The dust from which Adam is made is a pointer to universal human mortality. Eve's formation from Adam's rib, or side, is not meant as an anatomical description but as an archetypal one, pointing to the way men and women tend to relate. That the text is not talking about two specific individuals here is suggested by the fact that, after the early chapters of Genesis, Adam and Eve don't figure again in the whole of the Old Testament, except briefly in the opening genealogy in 1 Chronicles. They reappear in the New Testament, of course, but there, too, they are treated in archetypal ways.

That important seventh day

Now here's an important point: the opening creation story in Genesis has seven days, not just six. On Day Seven God *rested* and, in the

context of the functional view that Bible scholars have proposed, this is the climax, the most important day of them all. What is it all about?

Here, the scholars assure us, we are into *temple* terminology. That is the only way an ancient reader would have understood it. God has sorted out the chaos and put working systems in place, so now he can ‘rest’ in the sense of enjoying a stable state of affairs. With the job done, he can ‘go home’, so to speak, and run things from there. And since he is God, ‘home’ means a temple, which by definition is the dwelling-place of a god and also the control-centre from which he runs things.

Where or what, then, is the temple God lives in? All Ancient Near Eastern people viewed their stone-built temples as symbols of the *cosmos*, and the Israelites were such a people.⁵⁰ So the creative work of God described in the opening chapters of Genesis is in fact the construction of a *cosmic temple* for him. And it only becomes that temple in the full sense when he takes up residence there. That is what he does on Day Seven.

Viewed this way, the ‘creation accounts’ in Genesis are not about material origins at all, whether of the universe in general or of humanity in particular. They are *theological stories* that tell us what God is like, how he brought order out of chaos, got the cosmos-temple into sound running order, then moved in as God and governor over it all.

Arguments about the age of the earth are completely out of place in this context. So are speculations about the multiplication of species and the origins of the human race. Genesis is simply not addressing such issues, not even remotely. I believe this myself, and I do so without my respect for Scripture being in the slightest way affected.

⁵⁰ See Isaiah 66:1-2.

On the contrary, I feel thrilled that the great God presented there condescended to reach out to ancient peoples within the limitations of their pre-scientific worldview and make himself known to them. It's wonderful!

Accepting this view leaves us free to look at the available *scientific* evidence for the age of the earth and the origins of humanity, without being pressured to choose between that evidence and the words of Genesis. And that evidence points to an old earth, and to evolutionary factors in the multiplication of species, including the origins of humankind.

Embracing science

We Christians should not run away from scientific evidence. Instead, on the basis that all truth is God's truth, we should embrace it with enthusiasm. And the evidence is that the earth is very old indeed — over four billion years. Quite frankly, the efforts of some to prove that it is only about 10,000 years old are laughable. Their so-called 'creation science' is not taken seriously by the scientific fraternity at large, with good reason. And we should not be taken in by the claim, often bandied around in Christian circles, that a good proportion of serious scientists support Young Earth Creationism and reject evolution. That is simply not true.⁵¹

This is not the place to list the evidence for an old earth. I will instead point you, at the end of the book, to some works by Christian authors who are themselves scientists and are totally convinced by the

⁵¹ See Austin Fischer, *Are Scientists Really Split On Evolution?* at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2015/06/02/are-scientists-really-split-on-evolution-by-austin-fischer/>

data.⁵² The same goes for evolution and human origins, but I'll make a comment or two on that here before we move on.

First, I'm personally satisfied that, in God's purpose, *homo sapiens* evolved, through early humanoids, from even earlier life-forms. I feel no pressure at all to harmonise that with what Genesis says about Adam and Eve, for the reasons given above. At what point the 'image of God' became part of humanity⁵³ we have no idea, and probably never will, so I don't lose any sleep over that.

Second, we're talking evolution here, not *evolutionism*. It's a vital distinction. Some over-simplify evolution, then elevate it to the level of a philosophy, propounding a life-view where everything is grim, ruthless and down to 'the survival of the fittest'. On that view, life today has no room for virtues like altruism, caring and self-sacrifice. Might is right.

We reject that philosophy. Even the basics of evolutionary science are not that simple, for scientists have shown that the process is vastly more complicated than many would have us believe, and that there is clear evidence for positive, altruistic elements in the process.⁵⁴

Attenborough with the sound on

Most of you will be familiar with David Attenborough, who, over many decades, has presented some wonderful TV programmes about

⁵² Meanwhile, some helpful material is available at <http://www.godandscience.org/apologetics/creation.html>

⁵³ There is wide debate among evangelicals as to what being in God's image in fact means. The consensus seems to be that, in ancient thinking, a god's 'image' was his perceived 'presence', usually in the form of a statue in the god's temple. On this basis, the Christian view is that God put humans in his newly-formed cosmic temple (the earth) to represent him there. As the image of God, human beings were his corporate vice-regent governing the whole natural order. This view holds good whatever one's position on the evolution issue.

⁵⁴ See Charles Foster, *The Selfless Gene* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2009).

the natural world. He is a man totally captured by the wonder and immensity of it all, and his enthusiasm is infectious. He believes in evolution, of course, and this upsets some Christians, one of whom said to me, ‘I love the David Attenborough programmes, but I always watch them with the Mute button on.’

What a shame! I watch them with the sound on, and with delight, astonished at once by the beauty and complexity of God’s vast creation and by the evolutionary processes he used to bring it to its present state. Do I have to choose between evolution or creation? Absolutely not, and neither do you. Get real about all this. Rejoice in God, his Word, his world, his endless creativity, his vastness, his love and his reaching to us in Jesus. As Paul put it, in a different context, ‘All things are yours...’⁵⁵ Science, and its findings, are yours!

I’ve learnt that there’s no point in wasting mental and emotional energy trying to answer unanswerable questions. If humans evolved from earlier life-forms, at what point did they become responsible before God? Where did the devil come from? How did ‘sin’ first manage to infect everything? And why did God allow it? What should be our view of death — was it part of God’s original plan or not?

You won’t find definitive answers to questions like that, either in the Bible or anywhere else. The important thing is to face up to *current facts*: evil is clearly real and sin an ever-present problem. Humans today *are* responsible before God. Death is all around us. But we don’t despair about such things because, through Christ, we have come to know that these and similar issues will all, in due course, be resolved. God, who is Love, will bring his purposes to fruition. So, let’s focus on that and determine not to get ourselves into a knot over the debatable topics behind us that we can neither grasp nor change.

⁵⁵ 1 Corinthians 3:21-22.

Face these issues full-on, then. To be a Christian you don't have to believe in a flat earth, or a young earth, or an earth that has the sun going round it. In this turbulent sea of challenge, your faith can keep bobbing to the surface like a cork, no matter how big the waves, because the life of God inside you will keep you afloat!

7 - Violence in the Bible

The Bible contains an astonishing amount of violent brutality, much of it apparently condoned by God or even ordered by him, and that worries a lot of us.

It wobbles our tower because it is hard to square such violence with Jesus, who taught non-violence and modelled it by his own example. He also claimed to be a living demonstration of *what the Father is like*. But judging by many parts of the Old Testament, God doesn't look much like that at all.

Massacre and mayhem

Take the case of Achan, for example. He's the Israelite who, at the sacking of Jericho, broke God's rules by taking for himself some silver, gold and other items. When his misdemeanour came to light, they stoned him to death for it. We can perhaps go along with that, at a push. But what we find hard to stomach is that the stoning didn't stop there; it went on to include 'his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had.' And after the stoning, these were all burnt.⁵⁶

That is appalling brutality by any standard. Some will excuse it by saying, 'Yes, but it was Joshua and the Israelites who did that; it doesn't say that God required it.' Fair enough, but it does say that, after the killings, 'Then the LORD turned from his fierce anger.' That implies, at least, that God approved of what they had done — or that Joshua *believed* he approved of it.

It's not surprising that this kind of thing makes the 'new atheists' like Richard Dawkins rub their hands in glee. 'Just look at the God

⁵⁶ See Joshua chapter 7.

these crazy Christians believe in!’ they declare. And they have a point — *if that is indeed what our God is like*. So, we have to face the issue and find a tenable position in it all.

Let’s move on from Achan to the destruction of Jericho in general. Joshua announced that the whole city and its inhabitants were to be ‘devoted to the LORD’ — a way of saying that absolutely everything and everybody in it was to be destroyed. And sure enough, ‘They devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it — men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.’

Imagine the toddlers being hacked to death, babies snatched from their cots to be brained by smashing their heads against a wall, terrified teenage girls run through with the sword. It’s grim stuff — a massacre. Again, we can say that it was Joshua who commanded this; nowhere does the text say that God did so. But the text implies that God looked on it all with favour because, again, the sickening account ends with the telling statement: ‘So the LORD was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land.’

One way we can come to terms with all this is by accepting that, *in Joshua’s day, this was the way nations routinely acted*. They had territory to protect, and they often wanted to expand it. The way you did that was to assemble your armies and invade the land you were after. You grabbed it with as much ruthlessness as it took to finish the job. Joshua, then, was simply doing what was normal. Sure, he had the God-connection, but he interpreted what he understood of God in the only way he knew. And God, it seems, went along with that because he always meets us *where we are*, remember, not where he would like us to be.

But there's no escaping those passages where we can't protect God using arguments like this. Let's rewind to the point where the Israelites were en route from Egypt to Canaan. They were hassled by the Amalekites, who attacked them at Rephidim. The Israelites managed to defeat them, but never forgot the incident, holding a long-term grudge against the nation. Neither, it seems, did God forget it, and 400 years later, when King Saul ruled Israel, God said to him, 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.'⁵⁷ So here we have another Jericho-style massacre, but this time God explicitly commands it. And what seems worse, he rejects Saul as king for failing to finish the job properly!

I won't go into the gruesome details of other passages, but there are many of them.⁵⁸ Someone has estimated that there are around 100 Old Testament passages where God commands people to kill.⁵⁹ It's not a minor issue. The tragedy is that, since then, people have seized upon such passages to justify their own use of violence. 'It's biblical,' they have claimed. Some white settlers slaughtered native Americans on the grounds that they were 'Amalekites' or 'Canaanites' while, in England, Oliver Cromwell stuck the 'Canaanites' label on Irish Catholics and then felt free to massacre them on biblical grounds.

⁵⁷ 1 Samuel 15:2-3.

⁵⁸ A case in point: Exodus 11:4-5.

⁵⁹ Raymund Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats?: Violence and Redemption in the Bible* (Harper & Row, 1987). Quoted in Derek Flood, *Disarming Scripture*. Greg Boyd, in his book *Cross Vision*, notes that God's command to slaughter 'everything that breathes' occurs 37 times.

Similar texts were quoted to justify the Rwandan genocide in the 1990s.

What is God really like?

To be fair, we have to acknowledge that there are also Old Testament passages that portray God as loving, kind and compassionate. It's not all bad. But the existence of 'nice' passages doesn't remove the 'nasty' ones, and their existence side-by-side is a real problem.

It leads, inevitably, to picking and choosing. Opponents of Christianity pick out the nasty passages and use them to pour scorn on the Christian faith and its God. Christians, by contrast, tend to skim over the nasty bits and pull out instead those passages that show God's more winsome qualities. The slaughter of the Amalekites doesn't figure on the average Sunday School curriculum, with the children using up all the red crayons drawing pictures of it.

If your tower is not to wobble, you need to find a satisfactory position on this. I'll offer a suggestion, therefore, on behalf of those writers who have taken the trouble to explore the issue in depth. Let's go back to basics and ask the question, 'What is God like?' Then follow it with another: 'How do we *discover* what he is like?'

Many evangelicals will answer the second question by saying, 'We find out what God is like from the Bible.' Fair enough. But the Bible gives a contradictory picture. On the one hand, we have him commanding violence. On the other, we look at Jesus, of whom John says, 'No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son... *has made him known.*'⁶⁰ Jesus' attitude to his enemies is clear: he loved them. He didn't fight back. He forgave them even as they hammered nails into his flesh. And he taught us, his followers, to do the same.

⁶⁰ John 1:18.

In his day everybody knew what ‘enemies’ meant: it was the Romans, who were the occupying force in Palestine. The people of Israel longed for their independence, and hated the Romans. They looked to God to usher in the promised kingdom through a military Messiah who would smash the Romans and restore Israel to its former glory. In the meantime, you did all you could to strike at the enemy and weaken him. If you had no recourse to weapons, you fostered hatred against him. Then along came Jesus with a radically different line: ‘You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbour and hate your enemy,”’ he declared. ‘But I tell you, *love your enemies* and pray for those who persecute you.’ And he went on to demonstrate it by his own attitude to the nail-hammerers.

Then he throws in the punchline: ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, *that you may be children of your Father in heaven.*’ In other words, if you, as God’s children, want to be like your Father, this is how to act, because your heavenly Father is a loving, self-sacrificing, non-violent God. Jesus, as *the* Son of the Father, ‘made him known’ as such a God, and he urges us, his children, to adopt the same loving, self-sacrificing, non-violent attitude.

So *that’s* what God is like!

Only Jesus truly reveals God

How, then, do we square all this with the violent God of the Old Testament? In a word, we don’t. We can’t. The violent God who smiled on the genocide of the Canaanites has little in common, it would seem, with the God revealed by Jesus. Yet both portraits are in the Bible gallery, and that’s the problem.

The only way round this is really quite simple. Scripture, while it is all God’s revealed Word, is an unfolding story — there it is again — in which *not all the elements carry the same weight*. Old Testament

portraits of God are not in the same league as the final magnificent portrait painted by Jesus. Indeed, the perceptions of God experienced by the ancient Israelites were mere glimpses of him — and often jaundiced ones at that — compared to the full and open revelation of his nature that we later find in Jesus Christ.

Even within the Old Testament itself we see clear signs of progression in people’s understanding of what God is like. We can’t go into detail here, but one example will make the point: censuses. Israel’s kings were not supposed to conduct censuses. Why? Because that would suggest they were more interested in statistics showing how populous and great the nation had become than in trusting God to bless them. But King David broke the rules by conducting a census. Why did he do it?

In 2 Samuel 24 we read that it was *God* who, because he was angry with the nation, incited David to conduct the census — then punished them by sending a plague that killed 70,000. That certainly doesn’t look like the God revealed by Jesus. The writer of Chronicles, too, seems to have had problems with it. In grappling with the issue much later in Israel’s history, he came to a clearer concept of God’s nature. So, when he penned his own account of the same incident, in 1 Chronicles 21, he wrote, ‘*Satan* rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel’ — though it was still God who sent the plague.

In the Old Testament, God is more than once said to have sent plagues on his people — for example in Numbers chapters 16, 21 and 25 — in which huge numbers died. It is interesting, though, that when Paul cites these incidents⁶¹ he never attributes the plagues to God. Instead, he puts the damage down to ‘the snakes’ and to ‘the

⁶¹ See 1 Corinthians 10:9-11.

destroyer'. We need always to bear in mind, therefore, this *progression of understanding* when we read the Bible, and not bring to it a 'flat' reading that gives equal weight of revelation to every part.

As for the Israelites, they were people of their times, and those times were violent ones. They naturally perceived their God in the same way in which the nations around them perceived their gods. For those nations, the gods were tribal deities who delighted in patting their own people on the back and urging them to zap their enemies. The Israelites certainly *thought* that their God was urging them to violence and slaughter, but this was a warped perception. God, we might say, groaned and went along with them out of his covenant commitment to them. But he longed for the day when they would see him for the way he *really* was.

That day came with Jesus. We have noted already John's clear statement that Jesus alone has made God known. Other New Testament writers echo his statement. The writer to the Hebrews says, 'The Son is the radiance of God's glory and *the exact representation of his being.*' No-one else is that, only Jesus. Paul agrees: 'In Christ,' he exclaims with wonder, '*all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.*' So, what is God like? He is like Jesus! He wants no part in violence and brutality.

If you give every portion of Scripture equal weight you will have to build up your picture of God from all the parts. You will end up with a composite picture that is confusing, highly unsettling and, frankly, untenable. You will have a Jekyll and Hyde kind of God, who is loving and kind but at the same time trigger-happy and even brutal. You can never really relax with him, because you never know whether, if you snuggle up too close, he might suddenly have a violent

spell and crush you before you can back off. This is certainly not the God whom Jesus revealed.

It may wobble your tower a bit to be told that the picture of God we see in the Old Testament is distorted, but it needn't. Just hold on to the fact that *Jesus is what it's all about*. He alone gives us the true and full picture of what God is like. Once you get a grip on that, everything falls into line and you can see Old Testament characters and practices for what they were. I have personally found this quite liberating, and I now read the Old Testament with a new relish, thanks to this simple insight. I encourage you to move in the same direction.

'But I can't help feeling that this approach weakens my whole position on the inspiration of the Bible and its status as God's Word,' you may be thinking. Remember: Jesus is infinitely more important than the Scriptures that reveal him. Just put him first, and let everything else find its own level. Worship him, not the Bible. Maintain your priorities.

Jaws drop in Nazareth

To help bring this home we will look at the way Jesus himself treated some Old Testament passages in what we would today consider a very cavalier manner, picking and choosing which bits he approved. If he could be selective about the Old Testament, we, I suggest, have clearance to do the same.

Early in his public ministry Jesus visited the synagogue in Nazareth one Sabbath day. The synagogue leader handed him the scroll of Isaiah to read from, and he chose to read a portion that every Jew knew by heart. It came from chapter 61 and it goes like this:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me

to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour
and the day of vengeance of our God...⁶²

You can imagine the folk in the synagogue all silently mouthing the words with him as Jesus read aloud. As they did so they were looking forward to what they all considered the best bit: '*...and the day of vengeance of our God.*' These, remember, were all Jews living under the hated Roman occupation. And the Isaiah passage was all about the promised Messiah, the one anointed with God's Spirit, who would one day come to sort out all their problems, including the biggest one of all: the Romans. Oh yes, Messiah would be the instrument of God's vengeance all right!

Then, in the synagogue, jaws dropped all round when Jesus did the craziest of things: he put a full stop after the word 'favour', stopped reading there and closed up the scroll, before announcing, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.' *He had deliberately missed out the last bit*, the bit about the vengeance of God, the best bit, the bit they were looking forward to nodding their heads to with grim approval!⁶³

Let's be clear what Jesus was doing here. He was telling them, first, in no uncertain terms, that he himself was the Messiah that Isaiah had been predicting. He would do all those good and wholesome things that the passage said he would do. He would proclaim good news to the poor, bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim freedom for the

⁶² Isaiah 61:1-2.

⁶³ See Luke 4:18-19.

captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, and proclaim the year of the LORD's favour. But he would not, apparently, proclaim the day of God's vengeance! He was cherry-picking Isaiah's text! God, he was implying, wasn't into vengeance the way the Jews wanted. He, Jesus, would be a Messiah of a different kind, the kind God had intended all along, whose bent was to heal, restore, liberate and bless.

We have to ask, of course: how could Jesus mess about with Isaiah like this if Isaiah's writings were inspired by the Holy Spirit? Was Jesus saying that some bits were important enough to be picked and relished, while other bits could be quietly left to rot on the vine? Yes. He was exercising *wisdom*. He understood that the Old Testament, recounting as it did the pilgrimage of imperfect people with imperfect perceptions of God, was not to be revered indiscriminately. As God incarnate, he knew more about the true nature of God than even saintly souls like Isaiah, and therefore he didn't hesitate to pick and choose.

Cherry-picking the Old Testament

This wasn't a one-off. Jesus took a similar line with an event in the ministry of non-writing prophet Elijah.⁶⁴

Israel's king at the time, Ahaziah, had injured himself in a fall. Concerned at the seriousness of his condition, he sent messengers to consult with representatives of Baal-Zebub, a pagan Philistine god, to ask them whether he would recover or not. God sent Elijah to intercept the messengers and tell them that it was a mistake to consult pagan gods when there was a God in Israel who could answer the

⁶⁴ See 2 Kings 1.

question. And the answer was that Ahaziah would die from his injuries.

The king clearly didn't like this. He sent a captain with fifty soldiers to summon Elijah to the palace, presumably to query the verdict. The prophet didn't fancy the trip, since the king was evidently questioning his legitimacy as a prophet of God. So Elijah said to the captain, 'If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!' And it did. Soon after, Elijah again called down fire on a second captain and his fifty. Grim stuff by any measure. But 'it's in the Bible,' say some, 'so it must be OK — you can't argue with God.'

Now fast-forward to New Testament times. Jesus is travelling to Jerusalem with his disciples. Needing to find lodgings for the night, he sends messengers ahead to a Samaritan village to find somewhere, but the locals don't want him staying there and refuse to accommodate him. What, then, do James and John do? Recalling the Elijah incident, and reckoning it to be a good biblical precedent, they say to Jesus, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?'

Far from accepting that as a good idea and urging them to go ahead and apply this good 'biblical principle', Jesus, we read, 'turned and rebuked them.'⁶⁵ He was saying, in effect, that *the way of Elijah was not the way of God*. Elijah had called down destruction on the soldiers to prove that he was 'a man of God'. Jesus didn't think much to that and, by his response, showed that a true man of God like himself was of a completely different spirit. And his rebuke implies, I think, that

⁶⁵ Luke 9:51-56.

he had hoped his disciples would have reached that conclusion for themselves.⁶⁶

Some might say that Jesus, being who he was, had the sole right to do this sort of thing with the Old Testament. But I'm afraid his followers did the same! Take Paul, for instance. In Romans 15 he quotes some Old Testament passages to back up his point that the Gentiles have every reason to glorify God for his mercy towards them. If you look at the original passages you will notice that they contain some strong statements about God's vengeance, just as the Isaiah one did. But in quoting them Paul *misses those statements out completely*, and keeps only the bits about the Gentiles rejoicing and praising God for his mercy.⁶⁷ He seems to have a high-handed disregard for some of the statements about God that the Old Testament authors put into their writings. He was exercising wisdom.

Elsewhere Paul goes even further. He quotes Old Testament passages in such a way as to give them the very *opposite* meaning to the original one. His famous quotation in 1 Corinthians 15 says, 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' He is using it to illustrate the point that Jesus is on a victorious course, in which the last enemy standing in his way is death. He will triumph over it, and we will all one day be caught up in the benefits of his victory as we receive our own eternal, resurrection bodies. Death will be gone forever!

⁶⁶ Some manuscripts of the Luke passage add extra words. One variant has James and John asking, 'Do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy them just as Elijah did?' Another attributes to Jesus the words: '*You don't know what kind of spirit you are! For the son of man did not come to destroy the souls of men, but to save them.*' Most scholars see these as not part of the original text but as later additions. But they still clearly indicate the way the early church viewed this incident.

⁶⁷ Compare Romans 15:7-12 with the original passages in Psalm 18:41-49 and Deuteronomy 32:43.

But when you look back to Hosea 13, the source of Paul's quotation, you will find that, in context, it is saying the very opposite: death is being invited to come and destroy the people of Israel as punishment for their waywardness. It is saying, 'Death, where is your sting? Bring it on and strike them!', but Paul has it saying, 'Death, you have been at last disempowered!' Violence is not on Paul's radar — by choice, because his God, revealed in Jesus, is not a violent God. Paul is wise and tweaks Scripture accordingly.

All this has huge implications for the way we ourselves interpret the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, and we will come to that. For now, you just need to know, first, that while the Bible is all God's Word, *some parts are more important than others*; second, that the Old Testament no longer stands in its own right, but has to be interpreted via the New Testament; and third, that violence is being eased steadily out of the picture. You can take that on board without having to feel that your whole faith is under threat!

All this sets out the stall for us to think some more about Bible interpretation.

8 - Bible Interpretation

I was once in a conversation where the word ‘hermeneutics’ got mentioned. One young man asked, with a puzzled look, ‘What’s that? A new breakfast cereal?’

No! Hermeneutics is the technical term for Bible interpretation,⁶⁸ and it’s an important subject. Indeed, you could say that, when it comes to reading and following the Bible, *hermeneutics is everything*. Christians show their ignorance when they say, ‘Oh, I’m not into all that kind of stuff. I just read the Bible and believe what it says.’ It’s one thing to know what the Bible *says*, and quite another to determine what it *means* by what it says. Whenever we read Scripture, we are interpreting it as we go along, whether we realise it or not.

For example, Paul in four of his letters to churches says, ‘Greet one another with a holy kiss.’ Do you yourself ‘obey Scripture’ by doing that? French Christians often do, which is to be expected, because the cheek-to-cheek type of kiss is normal in French society — usually first one side, then the other. British Christians will do something different, depending on the kind of church they belong to. Charismatic types may go for something that is more like a ‘holy hug’, while more traditional Christians will settle for a ‘holy handshake’.

Literalist hardliners would argue, ‘The text says “holy kiss”. That’s what it says, and that’s what it means, so if you’re going to be obedient to God’s Word, that’s what you need to do.’ This makes two assumptions. One — an interpretive assumption — is that everything in the Bible should be taken literally or, as some prefer to say, at face

⁶⁸ It comes from the Greek word *hermeneuo*, meaning ‘to interpret’.

value. The other is that we should bring unquestioning obedience to whatever the Bible says.

Both assumptions are denied by many evangelicals today, including me. Some would say that the ‘holy kiss’ type of greeting was the cultural norm in Paul’s day, but that we have different conventions today. The bit that matters, they would add, is the core element — greeting one another in a warm, friendly way — and that we are free to use whatever expression of it is appropriate in our society. Fair enough. But note that that’s a hermeneutical decision.

Hermeneutics is practical

Hermeneutics becomes much more important, of course, when we come to bigger issues. We need, therefore, to be settled on the main principles that should guide us as we seek to understand Scripture. Earlier we noted one such principle: that the Old Testament must be understood in the light of the New Testament in general, and of Jesus in particular. We accept that because this is the way the New Testament writers themselves interpreted the Old Testament.

You may be thinking, ‘Oh dear, you’re losing me now. This kind of deep stuff is only for intellectual Christians who like to go deep into their world of theorising and heavy doctrine. It surely has little or nothing to do with real life, so count me out.’

How wrong! Tell that to the black Africans who were murdered or enslaved because their murderers interpreted Scripture as justifying their actions. Or tell it to displaced Palestinians today whose olive groves and houses have been bulldozed by Israeli settlers encouraged in their takeover by Christians with dodgy Zionist hermeneutics. These Christians look at the Old Testament promises of the land to the Jews and, disregarding the way the New Testament gives the issue a totally new slant, insist that the current State of Israel is a fulfilment

of prophecy. From there, they propose that God looks with favour on everything its leaders do, and that Christians should get behind them in kicking the Palestinians — many of them Christians — out of the land they have occupied for generations. No, hermeneutics is not a theoretical exercise. It determines the very way we live our lives and the practical choices we make.

Much of the wobbling among Christians today is the result of the questioning, by a growing number of scholars and writers, of long-held hermeneutical assumptions. I have introduced you to a few instances already, so you know the kind of thing I mean. Let's now return for a closer look at one topic I touched on earlier, and which has been for a long time hot potato: the role of women in marriage and the church — and it's all to do with hermeneutics.

Are women second class?

Bible-honouring Christians have formed into two basic camps on this. One camp holds that, while men and women are of equal value in God's sight, in marriage the wife's role is a subsidiary one, because Paul says, 'Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands.' Similarly, in the church women may serve in various ways but are debarred from teaching and from leadership positions, on the grounds of some other statements by Paul.

The other camp sees marriage as a partnership of equals, and in the church sets no restriction on women teaching or being leaders. Both camps honour the Bible. It's their hermeneutics that leads them to these different conclusions. I have shifted ground on this issue myself, so let me outline my own journey — and in the course of it we will touch on another issue mentioned earlier: slavery.

On the issue of women, my cultural background dictated my starting point. I remember my grandmother saying, when I was a

child, 'The master will be home soon.' She meant her husband would soon be back from work for his evening meal. Her choice of words reflected his position as the undisputed head of the household, and her own as the little woman dutifully serving him and looking after the children. My own parents were less hierarchical in outlook, but even so, I was happy with the books I read in the 1970s that put forward a scriptural basis for ascribing to the woman a secondary position in marriage and excluding her from leadership in the church.⁶⁹

The problem with this approach, I found, was knowing where, in real church life, to draw the line. Some people were happy for women to exercise leadership, including taking significant initiatives, as long as they did so under the oversight and approval of male elders. Others would question why competent women couldn't make leadership decisions in their own right. Where, in practice, did one draw the line between restriction and permission?

Could a woman head up the children's work? Yes. Could she be an elder? No. Could she be a deacon(ess)? Maybe. Somebody at some point had to draw a line, because the Bible itself didn't. I knew, of course, that some way-out Christians took an egalitarian view, but I could never square that with the New Testament's apparently clear endorsement of male leadership and female submission. What caused me to alter my view was a significant shift in my understanding of biblical hermeneutics.

⁶⁹ Such as Hurley's *Man And Woman In Biblical Perspective* and, later, Grudem and Piper's work.

Like most serious Christians, I wanted at that time to be *biblical* in all I believed and did.⁷⁰ The big question is: what do we mean by ‘biblical’?

One could say that adultery and murder-by-proxy are biblical, because the Bible records that King David committed both. That is ridiculous, of course, because the unspoken assumption is that by ‘biblical’ we mean what the Bible *prescribes*, rather than what it simply *describes*, and when Paul urges wives to submit to their husbands, and doesn’t permit women to teach in the church, I had always taken his word as prescriptive.

Description and prescription

Now I began to ask, ‘Is every practice and command in the New Testament — like the ‘holy kiss’ — by definition prescriptive?’ I suspected not. I had no problem accepting that much in the *Old* Testament was no longer prescriptive. There was obviously development from the Old Testament to the New, as when Jesus quoted various commands of the Law, and then said, ‘But *I* say to you...’ and moved those commands forward to a whole new level. There was, we might say, a *trajectory* from Old to New in which God’s will became increasingly clear.

But surely we couldn’t say the same about the New Testament, could we? After all, no *Newer* Testament followed it, so maybe the New Testament spoke the last word on everything. Having said that, the work of God’s Holy Spirit in and among his people didn’t stop in AD 90. It continued, and continues still. And that, for me, prompted the big question: would the Holy Spirit move God’s people on *beyond*

⁷⁰ I realise now that such a thing is impossible. It presupposes, wrongly in my opinion, that the Bible is a manual for all aspects of living. Our aim, surely, should be to be Christlike, rather than ‘biblical’.

the New Testament's directions? Even to ask such a question was a wobbler for me.

Answers gradually fell into place. I came to realise, over time, that at least some of the New Testament's commands and directives, because they were issued at a specific time in history and into a specific cultural situation, may never have been intended to set a pattern for all time and every culture.

This was an explosive idea! I had always been comfortable with a hermeneutic of development from Old Testament to New but, up to this point, had never considered that there might be a development from the New Testament era into later history. Now I found the weight of evidence indicating that there is in fact such a development. The pointers are clearly there.

Take slavery as a case in point. It was widespread in the Old Testament and endemic in New Testament society. Many of the first Christians were slaves, while others owned slaves. Slavery was built into the very foundations of Greco-Roman society. Now here's the thing: writers like Paul addressed that society *as it was*, slavery and all. What else could they have done? Their concern was to teach their readers *how to act in a suitably Christian manner inside the society and culture of their day, so as not to bring the gospel into disrepute.*

Had Paul and Co. announced that slavery was an abomination that needed to be rooted out at once, they would have been locked up for undermining society's foundations, and people would have dismissed both them and their gospel outright. So, they did the sensible thing. They said, 'Let's be pragmatic about this — let's exercise some godly wisdom. Now is not the time to harp on about abolishing slavery. The important thing is to encourage Christians to live their lives in a way that commends the gospel to others, and we have to do that *within the*

realities of society as it is.' Paul, therefore, commanded Christian slaves to be obedient to their masters, and Christian masters to treat their slaves considerately. Peter did the same. That is the New Testament line on the subject: *it does not condemn slavery; it tells Christians how to act inside it.*

Does this mean, then, that slavery is 'biblical'? Does God approve of it? Should we interpret the Bible on the assumption that the New Testament speaks the final word on everything, including this? Do we really believe in a 'frozen in time' view of God's will, in which what was applicable in the first century must always be applicable twenty centuries later? If we say yes, we are obliged at best to condone slavery and at worst to actively encourage it. Sadly, some Christians in recent centuries have done just that, as we have seen.⁷¹

Beyond the New Testament

Most of us recognise, however, that we can never in good conscience sanction slavery. The Exodus is one pointer to God's desire to end it. Another is Paul's advice to slaves that, should they get a chance to gain their freedom, they should take it without hesitation.

So, we have here signs that the New Testament is *pointing beyond itself* to a future where things will advance beyond the sticking-point of first-century society. The development of God's purposes did not stop when the last word of the New Testament was penned. There is what biblical scholar William Webb has called a trajectory of 'redemptive movement' in Scripture, not just from Old Testament to

⁷¹ Similar arguments were put forward in South Africa to build a biblical case in support of the policy of *apartheid* (apartness), which held that the different races should be kept separate. For years, white theologians leaned on Bible passages to justify white oppression of the black and coloured population of that country. Today, thankfully, they universally reject that position.

New, but one that continues beyond the Greco-Roman world into later centuries and on into the future of God's purposes. In respect of slavery, people like William Wilberforce came to see this and it inspired their efforts to end slavery once for all.

It was along these lines that my own understanding developed. As I adopted this revised hermeneutical approach, the way I perceived the relationship between New Testament commands and current practice underwent a profound change. You can see, I hope, how this fits the slavery issue very well. But now here's the rub: I came to see that the principle I had applied to slavery is equally relevant to the situation of women in marriage and the church.

The New Testament writers were dealing with the place of women in a first-century society in which the husband was expected to be dominant, and the wife obliged to be not only submissive but, in many cases, little more than a chattel. Women were barely educated, their opinions counted for nothing. They were thus seen as having nothing to teach. If Paul and Peter had suggested, against that background, that women should act as men's equals in every way, society would have reacted negatively. People would have written off the apostles, along with their gospel message. Society wasn't ready for that yet. So the New Testament writers took the pragmatic approach of telling women how they could best commend the gospel *in society as it was*.⁷²

Jesus, of course, had already lifted the status of women to new heights by the way he treated them, but first-century society wasn't ready for the end result to which that trajectory unfailingly pointed.

⁷² We need to remember that the apostles didn't know everything. They were still working through the full ramifications of Jesus' teaching and were far from having everything sorted out, e.g. Peter's dream in Acts 10 and his refusal to eat 'unclean' food. They still had their 'blind spots', not having worked out all the theological implications of the incarnation for the role of women, slavery, sexuality etc.

And that trajectory is plain to see. The New Testament writers held that Christ had signalled the end of the main cultural distinctions of the day — Jew/Gentile, slave/free and male-role/female-role.⁷³ In doing so, they indicated that the liberating trajectory would extend into the post-New Testament era when, in God’s loving purpose, marriage would eventually develop into a partnership of mutually-supportive equals, and gifted women, once duly taught, could teach others and exercise leadership alongside gifted men.

For myself, I believe this is what God wanted, what we should expect, and what we should put into practice today.⁷⁴ That’s what being ‘biblical’ truly means. That’s what it is to be ‘wise’.

This is *‘redemptive movement’ hermeneutics*, and it is here to stay. Don’t let it wobble you. Let it free you from an unhealthy bondage to the letter of the Bible, so that you can enjoy its liberating spirit.

Jesus: the interpretive key

You can buy books setting out what the authors consider sound principles for interpreting the Bible. Some give just half a dozen, others twenty or more. That’s because opinions vary on what’s right and what’s best. Consensus, however, generally forms around one key principle, and I want to make you aware of it. While it is unlikely to be a strong tower-poker, it may cause minor wobbles because, if you accept this principle, you may have to say goodbye to some others that you have held dear.

I have hinted at it more than once already, and it is this: *Jesus* is the key to understanding and interpreting the whole Bible.

⁷³ Galatians 3:28 etc.

⁷⁴ The book that played the major part in my ground-shift is R.W. Pierce & R.M. Groothuis, eds., *Discovering Biblical Equality* (IVP/Apollos, 2005). Piper and Grudem have responded to it in what is not, to my mind, a convincing way.

That fits well with a couple of points we noted earlier. One is that the Bible is a *story* whose culminating point is the arrival on the scene of Jesus. It's *all* about him, as we know from the Bible-study that Jesus himself presented to the two on the Emmaus road: 'He explained to them what was said in *all the Scriptures* concerning *himself*.'⁷⁵ The entire Bible leads up to him, is all about him and centres on him.

The other point is that, because Jesus came as the 'surprise ending' to Israel's long story, the New Testament's Jewish writers found themselves obliged to re-interpret the Old Testament in the light of the astonishing things he had taught, and the even more astonishing claims he had made about himself. Jesus became the lens through which they viewed their ancient Scriptures. In doing so, they saw truth and revelation in there that they had never seen before, and which even the original writers had been unaware of.

This principle has practical implications. Jesus, we have seen, reveals what God is like. He alone has 'made him known' in a clear, definitive way as 'the exact representation of his being'. If some parts of the Bible, therefore, paint a picture of God that is different from the way Jesus portrays him, this key hermeneutical principle establishes which portrayal must take precedence. The 'Jesus principle' trumps everything else.

It governs the way we interpret every part of the Old Testament. We must see the New Testament writers as the inspired interpreters of the Old, seeing it, as they did, through the Jesus-lens.

Think what this means in relation to the great story of the Exodus and the trek to the promised land. It was wonderful for the Israelites

⁷⁵ Luke 24:27. This does not mean that Jesus pointed them to a few isolated 'messianic' texts in the Old Testament, but that he showed them its trend and how it recorded the Israelites' growing understanding of messianic expectation, which was of course fulfilled in himself.

to be free at last from slavery in Egypt, but the New Testament writers assure us that that was nothing compared to the greater Exodus led by Jesus himself. In his case, the liberated ones were not just a crowd of Jews, but the vast multitude of lost humanity. And it was from the grinding slavery to Satan, sin and death that Jesus delivered them. The Israelites' eventual 'rest' in Canaan was at best a disturbed and troubled rest, but Jesus brought his pilgrims to a place of true rest from their wearying efforts to please God,⁷⁶ a place of peace in the assurance that he loved them and would love them forever. The whole thing is no longer about a tiny patch of Middle Eastern territory; it's about the worldwide company of redeemed humanity.

If the Bible is all about Jesus, *we have no business interpreting the Old Testament as if Jesus had never come*. Here is where the Christian Zionists get things so disastrously wrong. They insist on giving to certain Old Testament promises a meaning for today which, in Jesus, has been completely superseded. Yes, there is a current State of Israel but, if the 'Jesus principle' of hermeneutics has any validity at all, that State has nothing whatever to do with God's plan revealed in Christ. Jews and Gentiles alike, wherever they live, can be part of the Exodus and worldwide 'promised land' that God's purpose in Christ is really all about.⁷⁷

Old Testament with a twist

Applying the Jesus principle led the New Testament writers to interpret Old Testament passages in a way that today would probably cause them to fail a Bible college exam on biblical interpretation.

⁷⁶ See Hebrews 3:11, 18; 4:1-11.

⁷⁷ I have written about this at greater length in my blog article *Red Herring In Galilee*: <https://dmatthew34.wordpress.com/2018/01/16/red-herring-in-galilee-israel-and-prophetic-promise>

They break all the conventional rules. They take verses out of context. They ascribe to them meanings that never entered the heads of the original authors. They pick the bits that suit the purpose of their argument, and have no qualms about skipping the bits that don't. We have seen this in the way Jesus handled the Isaiah passage in the synagogue at Nazareth. The likes of Matthew and Paul regularly did the same thing. Let's look at a couple of examples.

The prophet Hosea operated in eighth century BC Israel. He was a tender-hearted man who wrote mainly about God's love and mercy towards his people. He reminded his wayward Israelite readers of God's past acts of deliverance, especially the Exodus from Egypt. Referring to this, he has God saying, 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'⁷⁸ God's 'son' here, of course, was the nation of Israel. In saying this, Hosea was looking way back into Israel's history, to an event that had taken place over 600 years earlier. Remember that.

Now let's wind forward to New Testament times, to Matthew, who is writing his Gospel in the first century AD. He is writing mainly for a Jewish readership familiar with Israel's history and the Old Testament writings, including the work of Hosea. Matthew is keen to present Jesus to them as the fulfilment of everything the Old Testament had looked forward to. He is talking about Jesus' early years and how, because of death-threats from King Herod, an angel told Joseph to take Mary and the Christ-child to Egypt for safety. This Joseph did, and they stayed there till Herod died. Then the angel gave them the all clear to come back to Nazareth. Matthew says all this, then adds, 'And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Hosea 11:1.

⁷⁹ Matthew 2:14-15.

Stop and think about that for a moment. Matthew is quoting the Hosea passage and applying it to the infant Jesus. Something doesn't square up. When Hosea first wrote it, he was referring to Israel and the Exodus 600 years before his own day, but Matthew applies it to Jesus, who was some 700 years *after* Hosea. What is going on?

It's really quite simple when you grasp the 'Jesus principle'. Matthew and his readers knew full well what Hosea had been originally referring to. But Matthew now understood that all the Old Testament writings led up to Jesus, the Israelite *par excellence*. Jesus, as God's Son in a unique sense, embodied the nation of Israel. He was the one true Jew. Like them he came out of Egypt and, as Matthew would go on to show, suffered the same wilderness temptations as them, but handled them much better. This theme of Jesus as the true Israel crops up throughout Matthew's Gospel and elsewhere in the New Testament, and it is thrilling stuff for us believers.⁸⁰

Here's another example, this time in Paul. In writing to the Corinthians, he quotes the prophet Isaiah, who in 49:8 has God saying, 'In the time of my favour I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you.' Then Paul comments, 'I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.'⁸¹

⁸⁰ A typical commentary on Matthew 2:15 says: 'Hosea's words are not a prediction, but an account of Israel's origin. Matthew's quotation thus depends for its validity on the recognition of Jesus as the true Israel, a typological theme found elsewhere in the New Testament, and most obviously paralleled in Matthew by Jesus' use of Israel-texts in the wilderness (see on 4:1-11); there too it is as God's *son* that Jesus is equated with Israel. Israel's exodus from Egypt was taken already by the Old Testament prophets as a prefiguring of the ultimate Messianic salvation, and Matthew's quotation here thus reinforces his presentation of the childhood history of Jesus as the dawning of the Messianic age.' From R.T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (IVP, 1985, Vol. 1, p. 91).

⁸¹ 2 Corinthians 6:1-2.

Looking back at the original context, we see Isaiah promising that God would hear and help his people, notably by releasing them from exile in Babylon. That would be his ‘favour’ and ‘salvation’. But Paul, using the Jesus principle, understands that the ‘time’ and ‘day’ of that release pointed to an altogether greater time and day when, by his death and resurrection, Jesus would inaugurate the day of grace. That day, Paul says, is now upon us, so let’s make the most of it, because what is now on offer is help and deliverance far grander than release from Babylon.

Did Isaiah have all that in mind when he wrote? Far from it, but reading his words through the Jesus-lens makes all the difference.

The bigger picture

Matthew, Paul and the rest interpreted Scripture the way they did because *they always kept the bigger picture in view*.

Strictly speaking we should not accuse them of taking Old Testament passages ‘out of context’. It’s more that they lifted them out of their original context and fitted them into another, superior one: the context of the goal towards which Israel’s long story had all the time been moving, which is Jesus and the new age of the kingdom that he introduced. That is the ‘bigger picture’.

We, too, need to keep that bigger picture in mind. We live in that ‘new age of the kingdom’, so we should aim to interpret the Old Testament the way the New Testament writers did. Yes, it will still be important to understand the original context, but only so that we, like them, can move on to fit passages into the great Christ-context which is what Scripture — and life — is all about.

If you have had any theological training, you will have been schooled in the ‘grammatical-historical’ method of biblical interpretation. The suggestion that there may be a different — or at

least complementary — approach to interpretation could be a bit of a wobbler. It will take time for you to work it through. Stick with it. The Bible hasn't changed. It is still God's Word. What may change in time is the way you handle it.

The ethical hermeneutics of Jesus

You are realising now, I'm sure, that hermeneutics is indeed everything. So vital is it, in fact, that we now need to take a step further in our look at it.

If we agree on the 'Jesus principle', we will be interested to know how he himself interpreted Scripture, so that we can model our own approach on his. He clearly handled the Old Testament on the basis of an *ethical* principle that comes out particularly in the context of violence that we looked at earlier. And his followers did the same.

We have noted how Jesus, Paul and others were selective in the parts of the Old Testament they appealed to. They were quick to support their teaching with parts that fostered love and care for others, while leaving aside parts — often in the very same verses — that spoke of vengeance, violence or retribution. They seem to have applied a *moral filter* that kept out any acceptance of the atrocities we find in the Old Testament and which are there sometimes attributed to God himself. We could say they interpreted Scripture *ethically*.

This is no minor point; it's a key hermeneutical principle. There's no escaping the fact that Jesus' whole approach steers us away from a rule-based approach to applying Scripture to life, and towards an ethical one.⁸² In the former, when an issue arises, you look up the

⁸² For instance, his sometimes obscure and even scandalous language is clearly meant to prod us into thinking deeply about ethical issues: 'If your eye offends you, pluck it out...' etc. His parables were often frustrating riddles, forcing us to grapple with the ethics of a situation and exercise wisdom in making our choices.

relevant rule and apply it. In the latter, you address the issue with a broad ethical framework in mind, based on the loving heart of God for people, and reach an appropriate conclusion as to what's right in the situation. And that, whether we like it or not, requires us to ask questions of the Bible text and judge whether, as it stands, it's enough for the situation. Sometimes, say the block-pokers, it will not be.

The fact that Jesus and the New Testament writers themselves *faithfully questioned the text* the way they did, and did so out of compassion, encourages us to do the same. That is why we, as evangelicals, must get away from our tendency to almost worship the text of Scripture. We must stop being naïvely and blindly obedient to it. The old adage, 'God says it; I believe it; that settles it', is not for me, because it wasn't for Jesus or Paul.

'The person with the Spirit,' says Paul, 'makes judgments about all things.'⁸³ That evidently includes some of the things that the Old Testament says, especially, I suggest, the grim acts it sometimes attributes to God. If you have the Spirit, then, you can make such judgments. You may find that weight of responsibility wobbling your tower — if you still have one. But you needn't, because Paul seems quite comfortable with it.

And he has more to say. In the same verse he quotes Isaiah: 'Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' In our heads we tend to reply, 'Wow! Nobody! None of us can know better than God!' But that's not what Paul is getting at, as his very next phrase makes clear: 'But we have the mind of Christ.' In other words, we have Jesus, and his Spirit, to guide us as we assess Old Testament Scripture. And that means we shouldn't take some of what it says lying down — even some of the bits it puts into the mouth of God

⁸³ 1 Corinthians 2:15.

himself. We have every right, in other words, *to make moral judgments about what the Bible says* — provided, of course, that our morality is informed by the character, teaching and example of Jesus, and not by fluctuating contemporary standards.

This fits perfectly with the ‘trajectory’ we identified, which shows a development in the understanding of what God is like as the *story* of Scripture unfolds. Different generations of his people understood him in ways that were typical of their times, and later ones sometimes contradicted earlier ones.

The Law, for instance, has Moses saying to Israel, ‘Just as it pleased the LORD to make you prosper and increase in number, so *it will please him to ruin and destroy you*. You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess.’⁸⁴ Is God the kind who takes pleasure in ‘ruining’ and ‘destroying’ his people? The prophet Ezekiel, who came on the scene later, didn’t think so: ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, *I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked*, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?’⁸⁵

This process of development in the understanding of God continues right through the Old Testament and into the New, where Jesus comes as the final, definitive revealer of the Father. If we want to know what God is like, we just look at Jesus — the way he acted, the way he reacted, *and the way he handled Scripture*. He clearly revealed a God who, whatever other qualities he may have, is love from start to finish. We ourselves are justified, then, in bringing ‘the mind of Christ’ to bear on the Old Testament, and that will require some ethical judgments on our part.

⁸⁴ Deuteronomy 28:63.

⁸⁵ Ezekiel 33:11.

This approach, then, does not stop at using Jesus as the lens through which we study the Old Testament. It asks what lens Jesus himself used, so that we can use it too. And it seems to have been an ethical one.

On that basis, we too should *evaluate Bible statements on their moral merit*. And ‘moral merit’ means ‘displaying the qualities that Jesus himself displayed’. We approach statements, therefore, in the way Jesus said we should evaluate prophets: ‘*By their fruit you will recognise them.*’ This principle will help us not only to assess Old Testament cases but also keep us on a safe course *as we follow the trajectory from the New Testament through history and into our own times*. If a course of action bears fruit that is wholesome, upbuilding, loving and compassionate, we will accept it. If it results in hurt, grief, sorrow and pain, we can turn away from it as not in line with the mind of Christ.

Can you live with that without wobbling too much? It offers a way forward that requires responsible reading and evaluation of the Bible, but it is a thousand times better than the bondage to the text of Scripture that has plagued so much of evangelicalism in the past. Anybody can work to a rule-book; it takes maturity to make wise choices.

Are you up to it? God thinks you are!

9 - Bible Interpretation and Sexuality

We noted above that interpreting Scripture the Jesus way ‘will require some *ethical judgments* on our part’, regarding both the Old Testament and the New. Let’s look at a case in point. One of the big issues for Christians today is homosexuality and gay marriage. How will the hermeneutical approach being proposed today affect the way we view it?

It will affect it radically, progressive Christians are telling us. It will require more than a brief review of the Bible texts. We will need a thorough re-think of our whole approach to sex and sexuality.

That’s something the New Testament writers didn’t get around to in their lifetime. For them, the two pressing issues were food (what kosher rules, if any, still applied in the light of Christ) and genital mutilation (whether Gentile men needed to be circumcised to become followers of Jesus). Sexuality, for the most part, didn’t make their agenda. Insofar as they did tackle it, they took major steps towards sexual equality,⁸⁶ but their thinking remained coloured by the patriarchal sexual power relations endemic in society at that time, as well as by the Old Testament’s patriarchal theology and mindset.

Paul, for example, didn’t challenge sexual enslavement, which scholars agree was universal in Greco-Roman society. It was taken for granted that any slave-owner could have sex at will with his slaves, whether male or female, and whether they were consenting or not. Can we deduce from Paul’s silence on this that he was in favour of it? Certainly not. But, because it was normal in Paul’s cultural

⁸⁶ Much of Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians chapter 7 is a case in point.

background, he may have been blind to it, to a degree.⁸⁷ Either way, the issue had not come up as an item of controversy in the churches he was leading. There were, in his judgment, more pressing priorities. It would therefore fall to later generations, including our own, to apply Christ's ethical approach to this grim practice.

We do that by recognising that Jesus introduced certain 'meta-laws'. These were major directives, applicable to a host of situations, and they overrode, if necessary, the particular rulings of *the* Law. Like loving God first, and loving your neighbour as yourself. Like taking the plank out of your own eye before fussing over the speck in someone else's. Like doing to others as you would have them do to you. Like loving your enemies.⁸⁸ These expressed the *spirit* of the Law, which trumped the letter every time.

It is these that we need to apply to sexuality in general, and to gay marriage in particular.

'The Bible says...'

Many Christians, alas, prefer to hang on to the letter, both Old Testament and New. A typical evangelical teacher today would probably announce a session on this subject with a title like 'Homosexuality and the Bible'. That in itself assumes a lot. It implies that the Bible has something definitive to say on the subject, and that whatever this may be, it's *all* we need to know, because the letter of the Bible is the last word on everything, isn't it? But the narrowness of such an approach is being questioned, as we have seen. Certainly,

⁸⁷ In addition to the Gentile society of his day, Paul's background included his Hebrew heritage, which condoned sexual enslavement through the teaching of Moses: in Deuteronomy 20:14, for example, women are listed, along with livestock, as the legitimate spoils of war.

⁸⁸ See Mark 12:28-33; Luke 6:31, 41-42; Matthew 5:44.

being open to the development of ethical principles beyond the New Testament, led by God's Spirit and the teaching of Jesus, will take us into broader pastures beyond the text of Scripture.

So let's see where the block-pokers are taking us. To set the scene, here's a statement from a Christian counselling manual:

'The Bible says little about homosexuality and probably nothing about the long-term homosexual orientation and same-sex commitments that have become common today. The term is mentioned only seven times, and in each case the reference is relatively brief. In these passages, homosexuality is never approved or condoned, but neither is it singled out as being worse than other sins.'⁸⁹

The Bible passages

Let's now look briefly at the key passages, which you should read for yourself. Starting with the Old Testament, they are:

Genesis 19:1-26. Here we are in the town of Sodom, with Abraham's nephew, Lot. It's a grim attempt at the homosexual gang-rape of Lot's two male visitors by the men of Sodom. As things go, it doesn't actually happen. Interestingly, when Jesus refers to the incident, in Matthew 10:14-15, it is in the context, not of sexual issues at all, but of infractions of the hospitality norms of ancient times!

Leviticus 20:13 (and also **18:22**). These statements are part of the 'holiness code', a set of practices and rituals expressing God's call to Israel to remain separate from the pagan cultures around them. They forbid homosexual relations outright as 'detestable' (the older versions have 'an abomination'), under penalty of death. The block-

⁸⁹ G.R. Collins, *Christian Counselling: A Comprehensive Guide* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 3rd ed., 2006).

okers point out that most Bible scholars today, including evangelicals, concede that this refers primarily to the kind of male temple prostitution that was common in Canaanite and Egyptian idolatry. We should note, too, that while ‘detestable’ seems a strong term, the same word is used of the shellfish, rabbit-meat and pork that Israelites were not permitted to eat.

Next, we come to the New Testament passages:

Romans 1:24-27. Here, Paul is describing behaviour typical of the Greco-Roman pagans of his day, like pederasty and the sexual abuse of slaves. The one and only biblical reference to lesbianism appears in verse 26. The whole tone is one of disapproval of homosexual acts, male or female, using terms like ‘error’, ‘unnatural’ and ‘shameful’. In context, it is presented as the kind of thing people turn to when they reject God.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11. In listing the sort of people who ‘will not inherit the kingdom of God’, Paul includes ‘men who have sex with men’. The Greek words used here are notoriously difficult to translate. Also, it is not clear whether there is any context governing the phrase which, to the Corinthians, would have been obvious but which we today do not understand.

1 Timothy 1:8-11. In a similar list, naming those whom ‘the law...is made for’, Paul includes ‘those practising homosexuality’, along with liars, murderers, rebels and others.

That’s it. Perhaps the most striking thing to us today is that there’s nothing at all about homosexual *orientation* — sometimes called same-sex attraction — as distinct from homosexual *acts*, and certainly nothing about the origins of such an orientation. Nothing, either, about sex inside a committed gay relationship between consenting

adults of equal status, which is no surprise, since such relationships didn't figure in the cultural mindset of the day.

Neither is there anything about gender dysphoria, transsexuality, bisexuality or any of the other variations that we have become aware of in our own day. But as far as the acts are concerned, while there is much current debate about the precise meaning of some of the terms used in the original languages in the above passages, and the relevance of cultural factors, there is no doubt that the overall tone is negative. And that, we are assured by those questioning that the Bible is the last word on the subject, is because, in Bible days, homosexual practice *was* all negative. It expressed only lust, self-indulgence, and domination.

A second look

But we are no longer living in Bible days, they remind us, so we should not let the Bible force us to condemn as 'detestable' and sinful any feeling or behaviour that departs, in the slightest way, from strict heterosexual norms and lifelong marriage between a man and a woman.

Instead, say the challengers, the Bible establishes as good and wholesome *marriage, commitment and covenant*. So, they add, if a homosexual orientation can be given expression in such a setting, it becomes legitimate and acceptable. Does a loving, committed, faithful relationship between two homosexual people, who want nothing but good for each other, violate the principle of loving one's neighbour? Clearly not. Viewed from this angle, the Bible verses, they insist, cease to be relevant.

Try to think about that calmly, rather than just giving way to a gut-level reaction. You might want to think, for a start, how such a view might affect your understanding of the Old Testament passages.

The Sodom story paints a grim picture of a corrupt society. Even Lot himself emerges from it as no saint. Gang-rape is utterly despicable behaviour by any standards, whether homosexual or heterosexual, so we can't take much guidance from this scenario to help the young Christian secretly struggling with same-sex attraction.

'Fair enough,' you might say. 'But what about the Leviticus passages? They are part of the Law of Moses, designed to keep Israel on the straight and narrow, separate from the dissolute pagans around them. The death penalty for infraction points to the seriousness of those restrictions.'

In reply, the block-pokers would ask, 'But are we, as believers in Jesus, still bound by the Law of Moses?' A key New Testament theme, they point out, is our liberation from it, so that we are no longer 'under law' but 'under grace'. We eat crab today, and we don't stone to death our rebellious teenagers.

'Very well,' you might respond. 'But *murder* was condemned by that same Law, and we wouldn't dream of saying that, under grace, that's now OK, would we? So why shouldn't the laws on homosexual behaviour still be observed?'

It does seem that, in the Old Testament Law, there is a spectrum of seriousness, with some 'minor' prohibitions (largely symbolic and ritual) at one extreme — like eating shellfish, and wearing mixed-fibre clothing — and 'major' moral ones, like murder, at the other. If the Law did apply to us today, most Christians, I imagine, would say we can happily ignore the former, but not the latter. Where, then, would homosexual acts figure? Are they closer to the 'minor' end of the spectrum, or the 'major' one? And where's the cross-over point? No-one can say, which means that other factors must guide our conclusions. We're back to the 'wisdom' scenario.

One such factor, some would say, is the death penalty prescribed for homosexual practice. That surely places it at the ‘major’ end? But the death penalty in Old Testament times was also prescribed for what today many would consider relatively minor offences, including adultery, blasphemy, being a dishevelled priest, collecting firewood on the Sabbath, and contempt of court — and, yes, for young people who were stubbornly disobedient to their parents. Perhaps, therefore, we should not give too much weight to this factor, or many of our teenagers would be dead by now.

The fact is, say the challengers, this kind of tussling with the Old Testament passages is irrelevant since — and there’s no escaping this — we are *not under Law*. We reject murder, not because of the sixth commandment but because of the teaching and ethics of Jesus. When it comes to homosexuality, Jesus had nothing at all to say, so we have to apply to it the broad principles of love and acceptance that he clearly did teach.

Yesterday, divorce; today, homosexuality

Many Christians, in spite of that, persist in appealing to the Old Testament for their blanket condemnation of homosexuality. So here’s another question for them: why, out of the hundreds of Mosaic laws, do we pick certain ones — like the ones addressing homosexuality — and make a big deal of them, while ignoring the rest? It must, I think, partly reflect the issues that are prominent in *current society*.

Not many generations ago, divorce was the big issue. Christians argued long and hard, on the basis of both Old and New Testament passages, about its legitimacy, whether it was ‘sinful’, and whether a divorced person should be allowed to take communion (or even attend church services). Most drew the line completely — on

perceived biblical grounds — over a divorced person's right to remarry.

But today, that's no longer an issue. Why? The Bible hasn't changed at all. Some would sigh and say it's because the church has been invaded by 'worldly' thinking. But I suspect the answer is different: the church at large has grasped something of the ethical hermeneutics that Jesus taught. Christians, responding to the Spirit's promptings, have come to realise that an attitude of love and acceptance towards divorced people, many of whom have suffered terrible abuse, is God's way. God, after all, is himself a divorcee.⁹⁰

Today's big issue is no longer divorce and remarriage; it's homosexuality and gay marriage. Christians have been as quick to jump to judgment against that as their predecessors once did against divorce. Will their view, we might ask, some years down the line, mellow along the same lines as did the line on divorce? I personally think it's inevitable, and desirable.

Now what about the New Testament passages?

The block-pokers urge us to remember that, according to all the evidence, first-century culture viewed homosexuality in a very different way from our own, and that's what formed the background for Paul and the other New Testament writers.

For instance, homosexual identity, as people tend to regard it today, simply did not figure in first-century thinking. The attitude to sex then was much more blurred than today's binary view of 'either heterosexual *or* homosexual'.⁹¹ Homosexual practice, while widespread, was rarely, it seems, in the context of long-term,

⁹⁰ He 'divorced' his people, Israel, to whom he was 'married'. See Hosea 2:2; Jeremiah 3:1-5 etc.

⁹¹ See C.A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

committed, loving relationships. It was virtually always imposed and non-consensual. In fact, homosexual acts were a way in which a dominant person asserted power over a passive one. It was a power game.

In view of this, we are told, the New Testament's frowning upon homosexual practice probably has little relevance to today's very different situation. If homosexual practice in the New Testament era was universally synonymous with promiscuity, sexual domination, and the subjugation of inferiors like slaves, Paul's statements do not speak to the gay marriage issue at all.

Many Christians today, however, take little account of any of that, either through ignorance, or because they have made up their minds already. What are your own thoughts?

Applying an ethical hermeneutic

The challengers keep bringing us back to the ethical hermeneutic that Jesus adopted, based on the principle of love — 'love' meaning *what's in the person's best interests, as Jesus would see it*. Today there is much debate on how we can apply this principle to the same-sex attraction issue, and to gay marriage.

We could begin, perhaps, by accepting that the attitude we are to show towards those with different sexual orientations includes an effort to get alongside them and understand their situation. So, let's say that a teenage girl in your church confides in you one day that, ever since she became sexually aware, she has been attracted to other females, and can't feel the slightest attraction towards boys. Because of the church's tacit line on this, she has felt guilty and doesn't know what, if anything, she can do about it. She asks for your confidential advice. What do you say to her?

Some Christians would cry, ‘This is evil! In fact, it’s demonic! I’d like to get a small group of faith-filled believers to pray for your deliverance from this spiritual bondage, so that you can be normal, find a nice boy to marry, and settle down.’

The ‘exorcism’ may well take place. But, let’s be honest: it rarely, if ever, works. Many young believers have been seriously damaged by this kind of simplistic, ham-fisted approach.

Others would take a more gentle line. ‘Well,’ they would tell her, ‘according to the Bible, the lesbian attraction you are feeling is indeed wrong. But we’ll remain your friends, and we’d advise you not to make your orientation known more widely than absolutely essential. Meanwhile, we’ll continue to pray for you. We advise you to avoid situations with other females that may lead you into temptation. Try instead to spend more time with boys, and let’s trust that, in due course, the Lord will heal you and make you normal.’

Sadly, that doesn’t work either. In fact, it probably leaves the young woman feeling worse than ever because she clearly hasn’t ‘exercised enough faith’ for the Lord to answer her prayers.

Yet others would say, ‘I’m afraid you’re just going to have to settle for celibacy, young lady. If you can’t enter into a heterosexual marriage, this is the only Christian alternative. So try and focus on other things. Take up needle-point or archery. Learn a foreign language. Do some sport. Take cold showers. Face the inevitable and make the best of it.’

Some Christians with same-sex orientation can, and do, settle for celibacy. Their sexual urges, while real, are of moderate intensity, and they can keep on top of them sufficiently to get on with life and keep busy with other things. To use Paul’s language, the ‘gift’ of celibacy is within their reach. But not all are like that. Some have a stronger

sex drive which, denied an outlet, is immensely frustrating. Focusing on other things is, for them, well-nigh impossible. Think of it this way: if someone had told *you*, when you were a young adult, that you must live the rest of your life in celibacy, how would you have responded?

These more highly-sexed folk would be among those to whom Paul would say, 'It is better to marry than to burn with passion.'⁹² But that's the snag. If you don't believe in gay marriage, 'marrying' isn't an option. What, then, is our young woman to do? Unless she slides into casual encounters which, as a Christian, she can't believe is right, it's masturbation or nothing, it seems. And that's really no answer, since there's no mutuality, no warmth, no love in that, and those are all key elements of what the poor girl yearns for.

None of these 'Christian' approaches, then, has anything of substance to offer her. She struggles bravely to live an upright, Christian life, but she's like a runner with a ball and chain round her ankle. Life at times seems hardly worth living. There's no way out of her prison of frustration; every exit is barred. Except suicide.

A real-life case

I declare an interest here. When I was in my late teens, I had a friend who confessed to me his same-sex orientation.

I'd had a sheltered upbringing, and the little I'd heard about such things followed the 'detestable' and 'abomination' line, so I couldn't offer him much except my continued friendship and the vow of secrecy that he insisted on. He was a fine Christian, sensitive to the Spirit, a good teacher and a keen evangelist. He went to Bible college and served for a few years as a missionary. From time to time, when we met, he would update me. He was desperate for a life-partner and

⁹² 1 Corinthians 7:9.

sexual fulfilment, and had tried getting to know various girls, but, in spite of frequent prayer and fasting, his desires remained unchanged. His traditional understanding of Scripture assured him that homosexual acts were wrong, and he had never indulged in any. His life was dominated by frustrated longings and desires.

We lost contact for some years. Then, when he reached his early thirties, he invited my wife and me to his place for a meal. He was an excellent cook and we had the full works, with an appropriate wine with each course. We talked about church, life, faith and the Scriptures until we took our leave. Little did we realise it was his 'goodbye' gift to us. Soon after, he committed suicide, leaving a message to say that he was no longer able to cope with the frustration of not only his unfulfillable homosexual desires but the deep psychological need for sexual fulfilment as an expression of love, intimacy and human connection. He might have been able to cope with the former through self-discipline, but the latter had proved unbearable. He had decided his only option, therefore, was to 'depart and be with Christ, which is far better'.

That should never have happened, and I still feel bad that I was unable to help him. Today, the block-pokers would flag up Jesus' ethical hermeneutic, and would encourage him, without hesitation, into a committed same-sex relationship. That — they and many others would say — is the only love-directed way forward. It's what follows when you pursue a trajectory of redemptive movement in your approach to Scripture and its interpretation.⁹³ On that basis, the New Testament, as it stands, is *not* the final word on this subject.

⁹³ It's worth noting that William Webb, who popularised the idea of a trajectory of redemptive movement, holds that it can't be applied to the homosexuality issue. I suspect, however, he has unleashed an insight that refuses to be constrained by the limits he himself puts on it in this respect.

It's certainly something to ponder. And it's not just a topic for theorising about; people's lives depend on it. Which is better: to condemn someone to a lifetime of either anguished frustration and strong temptation to be promiscuous, or to see them in a committed, monogamous, lifelong relationship which both fulfils them and frees them to enjoy other aspects of life without the constant background frustration?

The Christian block-pokers would look you straight in the eye and ask, 'Which do *you* believe God smiles upon?'

And while you're pausing to let that sink in, they will drive the message home by reminding you again that, in the first century, homosexual acts were, almost exclusively, expressions of sexual indulgence and domination. Most were non-consensual. It's *these* factors, they would say, that the New Testament condemns, rather than homosexuality in itself. Never, in Paul's day, were homosexual acts the expression of covenant love, so he wasn't in fact addressing such a situation at all.

Gay marriage — they would continue — provides a covenantal context within which homosexual acts can express relational equality, deep emotional connection, self-giving and even self-denial. The New Testament in general condemns *any* sexual acts that are purely for sexual gratification, but approves sexual acts as a consummation of covenant love in marriage. And thus, the block-pokers maintain, gay marriage is good and acceptable.

Whether we call such a committed relationship 'marriage' is really neither here nor there. Yes, of course God's creation mandate is for man/woman relationships that will populate the earth, and this will always be the majority thing. Human genitals are designed for that.

But we live in a less than uniform world. There will always be the exceptions, and love must surely find the best way of including them.

God breaks his own rules

You may find that a tough one to take on board. You could be excused for being captive still to the ‘rules’ approach that keeps quoting the proof-texts as alleged final evidence that *all* homosexual acts break God’s rules.

I personally can’t subscribe any longer to that ‘rules’ approach. But let me indulge you by supposing, for the sake of argument, that it *is* still valid. Think about this: Scripture shows God *breaking his own rules*. No Moabite, for instance, was ever to enter the community of God’s ancient people, but God let Ruth in and, what’s more, gave her a key spot in Christ’s human ancestry.⁹⁴ The ‘bread of the presence’ in the Tabernacle was reserved strictly for the Levitical priests to eat. But when non-priest David was on the run and desperately hungry, he didn’t get the chop for eating some of it.⁹⁵ God was pragmatic, and waived the rule, as did the priests who represented him. Many block-pokers today maintain that, if you insist on keeping ‘the rules’ in force, we can deal with the Bible’s homosexuality ones — including those in the New Testament — in the same way.

This, they would say, is an aspect of the ‘wisdom’ approach to the Bible that we looked at earlier. The Scriptures, being an account, spread over many centuries, of people reimagining God in the light of their times and the ongoing revelation of the Holy Spirit, keep moving on from one position to embrace a modified one. And that process

⁹⁴ Deuteronomy 23:3; the Book of Ruth; and Matthew chapter 1, especially v5.

⁹⁵ 1 Samuel 21 and Matthew 12:1-3.

hasn't stopped. Is it time that Christians modified their approach to homosexuality?

Many are saying yes. And while we're at it, they would add, we should be more accepting of other sexual variants. In the New Testament, the first Gentile convert was a man who, because of his sexual abnormality — he was a eunuch — was banned from the Temple and from participating in the Jews' worship of God.⁹⁶ Along comes the evangelist Philip, who teaches him the truth about Jesus, baptises him, and sends him on his way rejoicing. The Ethiopian eunuch was included in the divine embrace, and in the company of God's people.

We live in a far-from-uniform world. Some people are born with severe deformities, or a mega-high IQ, or a lack of skin pigmentation, or autism linked to incredible artistic skills, or genitals that don't fit the binary norm, or super-sensitive taste-buds, or a dodgy gene causing some impairment, or ultra-flexible joints, or spina bifida, or whatever.⁹⁷ Does the love of God extend to these 'different' individuals? Of course it does! And we, too, should surely love everyone, opening whatever doors are necessary to enable all of them to live as fulfilled a life as possible, which is God's desire for us all. That, the block-pokers insist, is sound biblical interpretation.

Some people, through no choice of their own, are 'different' in their sexual orientation. They are to be included. Should we not also offer hope to them?

Sadly, I've heard Christians in the past say, 'There's no place in heaven for homosexuals. Instead, they will burn in hell.' And that

⁹⁶ Deuteronomy 23:1.

⁹⁷ Many of these people, just like the Ethiopian eunuch, would have been barred from entering the Temple. See Leviticus 21:18.

leads us to two more issues where the tower is being vigorously prodded...

10 - Heaven and Hell Under Fire

A friend of mine was unwell. It began with her just feeling a bit under par, but soon developed into a fever, with nausea, vomiting and severe abdominal pains. It took a while for the doctor to diagnose it: pancreatitis. Once the problem had been identified, treatment began, and she started to get better. As I talked with her during her recuperation, she said something interesting: ‘The worst thing was *not knowing* what was wrong with me. As soon they told me it was pancreatitis, I felt better just for knowing.’

How typically human that is! We love to get a handle on things, to pin things down and put a name to them, to be able to say, ‘Ah, so *that’s* what it is!’

The same applies to our beliefs. That’s why some Christian denominations have a Confession of Faith, a Doctrinal Statement, or a list of Tenets of the Church. Or people embrace a theological system like Dispensationalism or Five-Point Calvinism. Signing up to it gives them a nice secure feeling: ‘That’s what I believe.’ The secure feeling disappears quickly, however, if anyone casts doubt on some aspect of their beliefs.

That’s why what we have considered so far may have made you feel insecure. Some of your traditional beliefs have been questioned. Your tower, if you still have one, has been wobbled. Well, there’s more to come, because evangelical pastors and scholars are today examining even some of the most basic aspects of the faith and concluding that they need rethinking. So brace yourself as we deal with two major ones: heaven and hell.

Heaven

For many evangelicals the heart of their faith is knowing that, because they have ‘accepted Christ’, they will go to heaven when they die. By ‘heaven’ they usually mean a kind of floaty, euphoric existence in God’s glorious presence.

Is that indeed our destiny? Many are saying it is not. It certainly didn’t form part of the apostolic gospel recorded in the New Testament. That’s why I winced when, at a recent ‘outreach meeting’, the speaker declared: ‘The big question, my friend, is whether you will go to heaven when you die!’ And then went on to say, of course, that if ‘my friend’ invited Jesus into their heart (another questionable concept) their sins would be forgiven, and they would be entered on God’s ‘OK for heaven’ list. What do you make of that?

Let’s ask a couple of questions. For starters, is heaven a real place ‘somewhere beyond the blue’? Or, more radically, is it a ‘place’ at all?

Well yes, you say. It’s where Jesus went when he ascended, and where he’s seated at the Father’s right hand. It’s where all the dead Christians are, too, rejoicing in his presence. It’s a location in the ‘up’ direction from earth — which for Australians and Europeans could be two opposite directions, but we won’t pursue that. Scholars like N.T. (Tom) Wright have for years been telling us that the biblical data sits much more comfortably with the idea of heaven as a ‘dimension’ rather than as a ‘place’. Wright has written: ‘Heaven, in the Bible, is regularly not a future destiny, but the other, hidden dimension of our ordinary life — God’s dimension, if you like. God made heaven and earth; at the last, he will remake both, and join them together for ever.’⁹⁸

⁹⁸ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (SPCK, 2007, p26).

If Jesus went to heaven at his ascension, which Acts says he did,⁹⁹ is it likely that Jesus is currently seated on a material throne in a spatial location somewhere ‘up there’? No. After all, God the Father is a spirit-being, not a material one, so he doesn’t have a right hand to sit at. Here we have human language stretched to its limits trying to explain spiritual realities. It ends up, inevitably, using figurative and poetic terminology to get the point across. Here, it is saying that, following his earthly ministry, Jesus was reunited with the Father and *now rules the universe*.¹⁰⁰ It’s describing the ‘what’ of the situation rather than the ‘where’.

The origins of ‘going to heaven’

But what about the dead Christians? They must be somewhere, we reckon, so where are they?

Well, they certainly don’t have their bodies anymore. Those are now ashes in the crematorium garden, or are rotting underground. Re-embodiment will be a reality one day, of course, but most Christians believe this will not be until the final resurrection. In a sense, therefore, the dead believers don’t currently need a ‘where’, since they don’t occupy any space, whether in ‘heaven’ or elsewhere.

Where, then, has the popular notion of heaven as our ultimate destiny come from? For many it’s the phrase ‘eternal life’ that is to blame. It makes the average Christian think ‘heaven’. But that’s a mistake. Eternal life literally means ‘the life of the age to come’. We

⁹⁹ Acts 1:11.

¹⁰⁰ ‘The ascension is then, as Luke certainly intends and John and Matthew hint, not Jesus “going away” in the sense of being out of sight and out of mind. Heaven, in biblical thought, is after all the “control room” for earth. For Jesus to be now “at God’s right hand” is for him to be given full authority over heaven and earth, as Matthew’s Jesus says explicitly.’ From N.T. Wright, *How God Became King* (HarperOne, 2012, p268).

get a taste of it here and now,¹⁰¹ but we will experience its fulness only in the age to come, after Christ's return. And even that won't be 'in heaven'. One thing the New Testament *is* clear on is that, in the end, it's *heaven that comes to earth*. The final state of affairs, called in Scripture the 'new heaven and new earth', will be one where God removes the veil between the two dimensions to introduce that glorious new universe, with its very bodily element. God and his people will then be forever one.¹⁰²

Another false trail is traceable back to a dodgy reading of Matthew's Gospel. When we come upon Matthew's common phrase 'the kingdom of heaven', we tend to assume that it means heaven, and that to 'enter' or 'inherit' the kingdom of heaven is to go to heaven when you die. Again, this is a misunderstanding. For a start, the other Gospel-writers, in parallel passages, use 'kingdom of *God*' — no mention of 'heaven'. Matthew used 'kingdom of heaven' simply because he was writing for a chiefly Jewish readership, and Jews were a bit squeamish about using the word 'God' lest, unwittingly, they might take his name in vain. So it was customary in Jewish circles to use 'heaven' to mean 'God'.¹⁰³

No, the kingdom of God is certainly not heaven. God's kingdom was inaugurated by Jesus at his first coming and is all to do with 'earth'. As followers of the King, our job here is to bring his standards to bear as much as possible on the world around us, as we continue to pray, 'Your kingdom come; your will be done *on earth as it is in heaven*.' When the King returns, that prayer will receive its full and

¹⁰¹ Hebrews 6:4.

¹⁰² 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1.

¹⁰³ A case in point is when the Prodigal Son returns and says to his father, 'I have sinned *against heaven* and against you' — meaning his offence was against God. See Luke 15:18, 21.

final answer, but, in the meantime, we are to move things along in that direction — and it's to do with our workplace, our family, our activities, our standards here on earth, not in heaven when we die.

Yet another source of 'heaven' thinking is Revelation chapters 4 and 5, where the twenty-four elders cast down their crowns before the throne of God and of the Lamb. Charles Wesley's hymn *Love Divine* has been responsible for leading Christians to believe, since the eighteenth century, that this is a picture of us, in heaven at last, acknowledging the Lord's kingship.¹⁰⁴ Sure, the scene in Revelation is said to take place in heaven, but its relevance to the last day is zero. Bible scholars would remind us that this passage is all about present, not future, reality — though seen from heaven's perspective. As God's people on earth, symbolised in heaven by the twenty-four elders, we acknowledge God's supremacy *now*. Not until chapters 21 and 22 do we get to the great ending of history, and there, far from seeing believers leaving earth for an eternity in heaven, we see the New Jerusalem coming down *from heaven* to earth, uniting the two dimensions forever.¹⁰⁵

What a prospect! I love it. And I never really fancied heaven anyway, at least not the way it has traditionally been portrayed. Not for me walking around on 24-carat gold pavements, dressed in a long white nightshirt, twanging a harp and singing mind-numbing 'worship songs' for ever and ever. If I *am* to end up in that sort of environment, give me instead a pavement of good Yorkshire sandstone or Cornish granite, and a vintage Hammond organ with

¹⁰⁴ '...till in heaven we take our place;/ till we cast our crowns before thee,/ lost in wonder, love and praise.' This hymn has some other questionable content, which I have written about it in my article *Charles's Off-Day* at <https://dmatthew34.wordpress.com/2019/11/13/charless-off-day>

¹⁰⁵ Revelation 21:1-3.

Leslie speakers. And I suspect that those, and lots more goodies, will be available here below when heaven comes down.

'A place for you'

'Ah yes,' I hear you say, 'but here's the clincher: Jesus told the Twelve that, in leaving them, he was going to "prepare a place for you". And, he added, the place in question is "my Father's house", which has "many rooms". What's more, Jesus would come again and take them away, "that you also may be where I am".¹⁰⁶ He was going to heaven, so that's our destination, too.'

If that is the last word on the subject we are, of course, going to have to explain away all the other Bible passages that point to a different final outcome. But we don't have to, because *monai*, the Greek word for 'rooms', means not a permanent dwelling but a stopping-place en route to somewhere else. It means a 'tarrying-place', and often describes an inn or guest-house. According to a typical Bible dictionary, it means 'a hospitable area (within a house or building) where a person can remain for a period of time.' So the disciples were not going to be staying 'up there' for ever; the 'rooms' were apparently just a stopover-place until the Last Day and the arrival of the 'new heaven and new earth', their final destination. And it's the same for us: heaven, it seems — assuming that 'my Father's house' and the 'many rooms' do indeed refer to heaven — will be our temporary abode, our 'room at the inn' till the big day comes for our final embodiment and relocation to the new earth blessed with heaven's presence.

But some still believe — as we noticed earlier — that there is no conscious 'intermediate state'. They would say that this passage has

¹⁰⁶ John 14:1-3.

nothing to do with either heaven or the intermediate state. Instead, they see it pointing to 'being where Jesus is' in the sense of his *oneness with the Father*, which is what we enjoy *here and now* as the Spirit of sonship comes upon us and enables us to cry, 'Abba, Father!' It's a spiritual 'position' rather than a material one.

So many opinions! If the Bible were clear on this subject there would be no such debate. But since it is not, we do well, I suggest, not to focus on a topic that God in his wisdom has left unclear and to focus instead on what *is* clear: the new heaven and new earth. When that happy state arrives we *will*, I suppose, be in heaven because heaven will have come to earth!

Hell

The 'heaven' issue has its flip-side: hell. This is a serious subject and not one to treat casually. But we do need to face up to the re-examination of it that has become widespread, prompting 'Rethinking Hell' conferences in several countries.

The simplistic thinking that accepts 'go to heaven when you die' has an equally simplistic view of hell. It goes something like this. There are two groups of people: those who are 'saved' (that is, they have 'accepted Jesus as their Saviour') and those who are 'lost' (that is, they have refused to accept Jesus, or have not heard about him). The first group, when they die, go to heaven; the second group go to hell.

That simplistic scenario is rejected by many evangelicals today, but for now let's go along with it so that we can ask what, in this scenario, does 'hell' actually mean? The standard answer has been 'everlasting conscious torment'. Each of those three words is loaded with serious spiritual cargo. 'Torment' is, by definition, indescribably awful. 'Conscious' means that there's no numbing of the pain, no alleviation

of the suffering. And, worst of all, ‘everlasting’ means it goes on forever, and ever, and ever...

Most who say they believe this don’t really believe it. If they did, they would spend every waking moment grabbing people and urging them to ‘accept Jesus’ in order to avoid it, and they don’t. But, today, even professional evangelists rarely make the fear of hell their leverage-point for getting people to make a Christian response. And that’s probably a good thing, because nowhere in the New Testament do preachers of the gospel do it.

The eighteenth-century American evangelist, Jonathan Edwards, preached a famous sermon entitled *Sinners in the hands of an angry God*. It had people crying out in terror as Edwards’s grisly descriptions of hell-fire made them feel they were slipping into it even as he thundered out his grim message. The word ‘gospel’ means ‘good news’, but this was bad news by any standard.

The good news, you might point out, is that, through Jesus, hell can be escaped. Fair enough. But if hell isn’t in fact everlasting conscious torment, the whole thing needs reviewing anyway, and that is what has been going on recently on a large scale. And besides, escaping hell certainly wasn’t the good news that Jesus and the early Christians got so excited about.

Immortality

Today’s widespread review of hell is mainly based on a fresh look at ‘immortality’.

Traditionally, Christians have held that we human beings, unlike animals, are immortal. By that they mean we have an ‘immortal soul’ that lives on forever regardless of what happens to the body. In my youth, I remember gospel preachers asking, ‘Where will you spend

eternity, my friend?’ The assumption was that we all live forever in one place or the other, in heaven or in hell.

When I was still in my late teens, I remember being unsettled by this and turning to Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology* to discover the Bible’s teaching on the doctrine of immortality. I couldn’t believe what I found: virtually nothing of any biblical substance, just lots of metaphysical and philosophical ideas. Berkhof states:

‘The position of Scripture with respect to this matter may at first seem somewhat dubious. It speaks of God as the only one who has immortality (1 Tim. 6:15), and never predicates this of man. There is no explicit mention of the immortality of the soul, and much less any attempt to prove it in a formal way.’¹⁰⁷

Yet he still argues for it — some would say unconvincingly.

The overall balance of Scripture in this matter seems to suggest that God alone is inherently immortal. If human beings are immortal, too, it would appear to be because God bestows immortality upon them as a gift. Some Christians, however, maintain that he only bestows it upon those who have put their trust in Jesus, and that the rest, once they have suffered their due punishment, will, because they remain mortal, cease to exist. God will annihilate them. This view is usually called ‘conditional immortality’.

Others, by contrast, would say that because ‘God was reconciling *the world* to himself in Christ, not counting *people’s* sins against them’,¹⁰⁸ immortality is now a trait of *every* human being. If that is the case, perhaps ‘Where will you spend eternity?’ remains an appropriate

¹⁰⁷ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1938 p 674).

¹⁰⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:19

question. Here, then, we have yet another topic on which the Bible is unclear, and Christians divided.

Resurrection

Resurrection, most would say, is a different matter. It seems pretty clear that, at the Lord's return, all human beings, the righteous and the wicked alike, will be resurrected to stand before Christ, the Judge. The traditional view is that those who are his own, through faith, will enjoy the fulness of his presence forever in the new heavens and new earth — the 'eternal state'.

And what about the rest? Again, it's a case of 'one Bible, many opinions'. Some Christians believe that those who never heard the gospel, plus those who rejected it during their lifetime, will have a post-mortem opportunity to embrace Christ and all he has achieved. If they do, they will enjoy eternal bliss. If they do not, they will be consigned to hell. How long they will remain there depends on your views on immortality. If they remain mortal, they will not be there forever; they will suffer a sentence deemed just — in both duration and intensity — by Christ the Judge,¹⁰⁹ but it will end with their annihilation. If, on the other hand, they *are* immortal, the traditional view is that they will be in hell forever, with no hope of escape.

A different school of thought is the one normally labelled *universalism*. This is the belief that, in due course, *everyone* will enjoy God's eternal bliss. We will return to this later.

Here, I don't intend to go into the biblical details of hell — *hades*, *gehenna* and all the rest, plus the meaning of the Greek word *aiionios*, usually translated 'eternal'. I will point you instead, at the end of the book, to the studies that will provide everything you need. All you

¹⁰⁹ Luke 12:47-48.

need to know at this stage is that the traditional view of hell is being widely questioned by evangelicals today.

I imagine that, instead of being a tower-wobbler, some of this, at least, probably makes you feel better. Certainly, many Christians find it hard believe in the ‘angry God’ proclaimed by Jonathan Edwards, especially since the New Testament presents God as love. And they feel reluctant to trust a God who, for sins committed in the limits of our time-space world, may not just send people to a place of intense torment, but may keep them there forever. The punishment does not fit the crime.

It is interesting that much of the reasoning behind the traditional position on hell relies on a medieval worldview that we today rightly reject. Back then, it was argued that to kill a peasant was serious. If you killed the squire, that was much more serious. And if you killed the king, that was unimaginably serious. The punishment in each case would be in proportion to the status of the victim.

Today we rightly reject such thinking; murder is murder, regardless of who the victim might be, and the punishment should reflect that. But back in the eleventh century, theologians like Anselm saw things the other way, and on that basis argued that, because God is an *infinite* being, sin against him requires an infinite punishment, namely, torment that never ends. It’s a deeply flawed argument and we do well to throw it out as unacceptable. But old ideas die hard, and this medieval reasoning lies behind the traditional view of hell that many still embrace.

The wrath of God

Maybe thinking about hell made the phrase ‘the wrath of God’ pop into your mind. We need to look briefly at that because, like everything else, it is being poked!

It is normally considered an aspect of God's judgment. 'Wrath', of course, is simply an old term for 'anger'. Is God, then, an angry God? Some believe so, including Jonathan Edwards. Many of us have been taught that, while God is love, he is at the same time angry when it suits him, particularly against sinners, whom he legitimately punishes for their sin, unless they trust Christ. It's an aspect of his justice as the ultimate Judge.

Judgment comes in two varieties: *punitive* and *restorative*. Punishment, too, comes in two varieties, which we might call *retributive* and *organic*. Evangelicals have tended to assume that God's judgment is punitive, and that the punishment he dispenses is retributive. The block-pokers, however, favour the alternatives in both cases. We need, therefore, to be clear what we mean by them all.

Let's begin with punishment. Supposing a five-year-old discovers that it's fun to pull the tail of the family's dog. Dad sees him doing it and, fearing that if he were to pull too hard, the dog might bite him, warns his son not to do it. But the boy disobeys, doing it time and time again. So Dad punishes him: no visit to the park today, and no chocolate either. That's *retributive* punishment. It's imposed by Dad at his discretion, and it bears no particular relation to the nature of the offence.

Here's the other scenario. Dad warns his son, as before. As soon as Dad goes out of the room, the little boy, looking for more fun, and in spite of Dad's plain warning, pulls the dog's tail particularly hard. The dog reacts by turning round and giving his hand a sharp nip. That's *organic* punishment. It's the direct outcome of pursuing a course of action contrary to the loving direction that Dad had given.

Which is God's kind, do you think? Theologians and scholars today are insisting that it's the latter: the organic variety. God, they

hold, has built the universe in such a way that *sin* — departure from his loving guidelines — *automatically* brings painful consequences. He doesn't therefore *need* to be angry or retributive. They see the 'wrath' statements as metaphorical, or as anthropomorphisms, and remind us that the Scriptures are on a trajectory towards an understanding of God as one who is opposed to violence — as we saw earlier.

Now let's turn to his judgment. Those who hold that it is *punitive* believe that punishment is a valid end in itself. To give a human example, a woman who has had too much to drink on a night out gets into her car to drive home, even though she knows that to do so is both illegal and dangerous. She fails to notice a pedestrian-crossing and hits an elderly man who is making his way across the road. He is seriously injured, and dies in hospital the next day.

She later appears in court and is sentenced to some years in prison. Her life there is grim. The prison provides little, if anything, to help her learn from her action, and why should it? She is suffering for the crime she committed, and that, to the punitive mindset, justifies her being there. Punishment is an end in itself.

A *restorative* judgment would be based on efforts to help her get herself sorted out. The aim in it all would be to *restore* her: to get her back on her feet again as a wiser, more responsible person for whom drink driving is an absolute no-no.

Which approach to judgment is God's kind, in your view? The block-pokers are saying it's always the restorative kind. He is always looking for ways to get us back on our feet again, so that we can move forward with increasing maturity, wiser, more loving and more Christlike as a result of our mistakes. When Peter denies his Lord, he isn't damned. Instead, Jesus wisely and lovingly reinstates him and gives him huge responsibilities in his church. That's the pattern.

You need to look at the Scriptures and reach your own decision on these issues. Some of the books listed in my final chapter will provide you with exegesis of the key passages, and other pointers.

So back to ‘the wrath of God’. The block-pokers are unanimous in declaring it to be organic in nature. If we insist on sliding against the grain of his loving provision for our welfare, we will get painful splinters in our backside. He doesn’t need to dish out stock punishments; sin comes with negative consequences built in. That may explain why, in the opening chapter of Romans, we read several times that when people strayed from God’s ways, he ‘gave them over’ to the natural results of their folly.¹¹⁰

All this, of course, has a bearing on the hell question. If God’s justice is punitive, it is perhaps understandable that for what evangelicals have considered the greatest sin of all, which is to reject Christ, God has just one standard penalty: hell. But if it is restorative, even if people end up in some kind of hell as a natural outcome of their rebellion against God, there may be hope that the awfulness of their experience, plus the winsomeness of divine love, will make them turn to God even at that late stage, to be restored at last.

Plenty to think about there. But now let’s broaden our approach from these specific doctrines to look at doctrinal *systems* and how they, too, are today coming under fire.

¹¹⁰ Romans 1:18-28, specifically verses 24, 26 and 28.

11 - Belief-Systems

By *belief-systems* I mean sets of interconnected doctrines. To establish a key point, we will look briefly at Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Then we will look at two popular systems within Protestantism: Dispensationalism and Calvinism, both of which are taking some flak today.

Feeling secure

We like systems because they provide a neat framework for our beliefs. But they can be, in many cases, a prop for the immature.

We see this illustrated in the difference between the way God dealt with his people in Old Testament times and how he deals with us as followers of Jesus. To the Israelites he gave the Law. While this started with major principles, like the Ten Commandments, it then expanded into great detail, covering virtually every aspect of everyday life and worship in ancient times. Nothing was left open-ended; there was a fixed ruling on everything — try reading Leviticus. That was because the Israelites were God's *infant* people, so to speak, and he treated them accordingly.

When my own children were young, I would say, 'Right, it's time for bed now. Put your toys away. Bring your pyjamas and I'll help you put them on. Now go and brush your teeth. Get your teddy. Give Mummy a kiss. Right, upstairs we go!' They needed that degree of structured detail and steering in order to feel secure and to learn patterns of life that would stand them in good stead in later life. As they grew older, I could back off. When bedtime came round, I would just need to say, 'OK, son, time to get ready for bed.' Then I would leave him to do the necessary. He might choose to do certain things

in a different order, and the process would involve elements quite different from those of his toddler days. But I trusted him to get on with it, and he did.

Christians are, you might say, God's *grown-up* children, and he handles us through similar broad principles rather than through rigid, detailed rules and systems. We are under grace, not law. We have God's Holy Spirit. We can exercise wisdom. But a bit of the toddler lingers in us all, and there are times when, with fond memories of secure childhood days, we long for a bit of the old, detailed clarity. It's nice, sometimes, not to have to think about things too much and just be told what to believe and what to do.

Catholics and Orthodox

This is one reason, I think, why many are drawn to Roman Catholicism. It offers a comprehensive system of doctrines and practices that remains closed to debate. When you sign up, you sign up to the system and all its interconnected parts. You can't, for instance, decide that you will reject purgatory but hold on to heaven and hell. You can't say, 'I'm OK with bishops, but I've no time for cardinals and the pope.' It's the whole package or nothing. I have often come away frustrated from arguments with charismatic Catholics about, say, the Assumption of Mary. They may have admitted to a degree of doubt as to whether it really happened, and I have encouraged them to follow their conviction more boldly. But no, they say, 'I'm a Catholic and it's part of our doctrinal framework, so I go along with it.'

Recent years have seen a significant movement of Christians in Britain and America out of their charismatic and Pentecostal churches into the Eastern Orthodox Church, which now has branches throughout the West. When asked why they have taken this step,

most say they want a greater sense of continuity with Christians of previous centuries and that the EO Church, which didn't even have a Reformation to throw it off course, provides just that. And, they add, they find a deep security in the set-in-concrete liturgies.

One advantage enjoyed by the Catholic and Orthodox churches we pinpointed earlier: their insistence on accepting the system as a whole makes for a high degree of unity. Once you permit serious questioning, and especially when you allow people to interpret Scripture for themselves, unity quickly goes out of the door in the alleged interests of 'truth'. And you end up with 9,000 denominations. So we have to ask whether an imposed system that tends to keep some people in spiritual infancy is a price worth paying for unity, or whether it is better to open things up, risk the fragmentation, and believe that unity will come about in due course by some other means. For myself, I'll go with the second option. And the fact that you are reading this book probably means you have made the same choice.

I want to be clear, though, that in raising questions about the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches *as denominations* I fully accept that some Christians of the finest kind are to be found in both. I have friends there for whose godliness I have the most profound respect.

Now that we understand the appeal of a belief-system, let's look at two within Protestantism that are popular today: Dispensationalism and Calvinism. The godly Bishop Ryle once observed: 'I have long come to the conclusion that men may be more systematic in their statements than the Bible, and may be led into grave error by the idolatrous veneration of a system.'¹¹¹ I am convinced that both of these systems have caused untold damage through the 'idolatrous

¹¹¹ J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts On The Gospels* (Baker, 1979. Vol 3, p157).

veneration' they have inspired in some of their followers — and I am not alone in voicing that conviction.

Dispensationalism

I was raised in a Brethren church where Dispensationalism was embraced and taught. The name of John Nelson Darby, a major exponent of the system, was spoken in hushed tones. At an early age I was given my first Scofield Reference Bible, in which, alongside the King James text, were Scofield's detailed interpretive notes based on his system of dispensations.

These are nine historical periods in which, it is alleged, God dealt with his people according to different criteria. These dispensations were: (1) *Innocence* — from creation to the fall; (2) *Conscience* — from the fall to the flood; (3) *Civil government* — from the flood to Babel; (4) *Promise* — from Babel to Mount Sinai; (5) *Mosaic law* — from Sinai to the Upper Room; (6) *Church* — from the Upper Room to the rapture; (7) *Tribulation* — from the rapture to the second coming; (8) *Millennium* — from the second coming to the Great White Throne judgment; and (9) *New Creation* — from the Great White Throne judgment through eternity.

How satisfyingly neat! And if I had any doubts or questions, they could all be sorted out by reference to the Scofield Bible. The system was comprehensive, with all manner of interesting side-doctrines. The Jews figured prominently. I was assured that God had both an earthly people, the Jews, and a heavenly people, the church, running on parallel tracks, with different destinies. And the church, I was taught, would always be a back-against-the-wall outfit, small and beaten down, waiting faithfully for the rapture, which would whisk us upstairs away from all the nasty stuff. It fostered an isolationist attitude among us, and, while we dutifully engaged in 'preaching the

gospel' to outsiders, we never really expected to see much fruit. And of course, we couldn't look for any help or encouragement via the gifts of the Holy Spirit because those all died out, we were told, when the New Testament canon was completed.

A personal experience of baptism in the Spirit when I was seventeen catapulted me into a vigorous enjoyment of God and the Bible that led very quickly to my waving goodbye to the Dispensationalist system for ever. There were, and still are, some fine, godly people within Dispensationalist circles, and I embrace them gladly as brothers and sisters in Christ without embracing their system. I have been convinced for many years that it is an artificial system, read into the Bible rather than drawn from it. But it has shown itself capable of exercising an iron grip on the minds of its adherents, who read Scripture through the grid it provides and feel unable to throw it off. It's a security thing for them.

And again, because it is a system you can't pick and choose which bits to believe. The millennium, for instance, is non-negotiable. You not only have to believe in it but also to accept the nature of it, as taught by the system, and where it fits in the scheme of things. Take one cog out of the machine and it grinds to a halt.

Having said this, it has been encouraging to see a degree of fresh thinking in some Dispensationalist circles in recent times, so that now several different brands of Dispensationalism are on offer. But the common elements outweigh the variants, and the system continues to exercise its baleful influence on too many of God's people. As far as I can tell, Dispensationalism is on the decline, remaining strongest in conservative quarters in the USA but with decreasing influence elsewhere. If you have moved in Dispensationalist circles yourself, this may be a wobbler for you, but I would encourage you to explore the happier alternatives outside of those circles.

Calvinism

Calvinism is named after the great French Reformer of the sixteenth century, John Calvin, who spent most of his life in Switzerland.

A towering intellect, he produced the first edition of his famous *Institutes Of The Christian Religion* when he was only 26 years old. He wrote out of a deep conviction that the Roman Catholic Church, which had dominated Europe for centuries, had become corrupt beyond repair and that he was an instrument in God's hands to rediscover and systematise the true Christian religion as taught in Holy Scripture.

The central theme for him was God's *sovereignty*. Whatever else God was, he was first and foremost the sovereign God: he *controlled everything*. He it was who ruled the affairs of humanity, set up and deposed kings and, most important of all, dispensed saving grace to those who, in his sovereignty, he had elected to salvation. But it was not until the following century that his ideas were developed, and taken further, by the likes of the English Puritans. They worked his seminal teachings into more of a fixed system of doctrine which, not surprisingly, came to be known as Calvinism.

Just as Dispensationalism has its nine dispensations, Calvinism has its 'five points' — five major, interconnected doctrines usually summarised in the acronym TULIP. The five points are: (1) *Total depravity* — every aspect of human nature is corrupted by the fall; (2) *Unconditional election* — God chooses some (not all) to receive salvation without regard to any merit or action of their own; (3) *Limited atonement* — Jesus died to deal with the sins only of the elect (not of all); (4) *Irresistible grace* — God works irresistibly in the lives of the elect to bring them to a place of saving trust in Christ; (5) *Perseverance of the saints* — because their election, the application of

Christ's atonement, and the granting of repentance and faith are all God's doing alone, he will complete the work by ensuring that they stay faithful till their dying day.

The five cannot be broken up because each one is bound to all the others. You might say, 'Well, I'm fine with most of them, but I believe that Jesus died for everybody, not just for the elect, so I'll be a four-point Calvinist, if you don't mind.' You can't do that, a Calvinist would reply, because Jesus died to *save*, not just to make salvation *possible*. So, if he died for all, all will be saved. And since many seem to depart this life rejecting God and Christ completely, and are thus *not* saved,¹¹² Jesus can't have died for all, can he? Of course, you can quote Bible verses to show that he did die for all, but the Calvinist would say it depends what you mean by 'for'. And so the arguments go on, late into the night.

Calvinists, it has to be said, have a track record of intellectual and spiritual snobbery. They widely allege that only their system is worth the label 'biblical', and that it's the only one able to cope with rigorous intellectual analysis. This is an empty boast, and one that assigns to the human intellect a greater value than I suspect God himself puts on it. Besides, if 'total depravity' is true, the intellect is unreliable anyway — including the intellect of Calvinists.

But leaving all that aside, Calvinism's main appeal is its coherence as a *system*. Within its boundaries it dots all the i's and crosses all the t's, and even if it raises more questions than it answers, it does enable its adherents to feel secure. One ex-Calvinist wrote of his one-time fascination with it:

¹¹² Calvinists take the view, widespread among evangelicals generally, that death is the cut-off point, after which repentance and faith are no longer possible.

‘I loved it — I loved its fine lines of thinking, and I think what I liked most is that it both put me in my place and God in his, and I liked that sense of all things being where they ought to be.’¹¹³

In recent times there has been a resurgence of the system, chiefly in the USA, where it has been labelled ‘the new Calvinism’. It has gained popularity through the writings of John Piper and others. But while many have run to it for security, and absolution from the need to think too much, many others have become deeply disillusioned with it and are stating their reasons openly. If you have been an avowed Calvinist yourself, it will pain you to examine those reasons. It could be a major wobbler for you, because since Calvinism is an integrated belief-system, an attack on any one of its five points is an attack on the whole, and you will feel as if somebody is kicking away your crutches.

Be assured, you can wave goodbye to Calvinism without your spiritual world disintegrating. But it won’t be easy. So brace yourself for a few knocks.

What is God’s primary attribute?

The challenges focus on several key elements. The main one questions Calvinism’s acceptance of sovereignty — control — as God’s primary attribute.

Why, the challengers ask, should sovereignty be accorded this status? It seems an arbitrary choice. If we are to be guided by the New Testament, ‘God is *love*’. And, they add, it doesn’t say just that God is *loving*, but that he *is love* — love is not just an aspect of his being but

¹¹³ Austin Fischer, *Young, Restless, No Longer Reformed: Black Holes, Love and a Journey In and Out of Calvinism* (Cascade Books, 2014, p2).

is his being, his very essence.¹¹⁴ That certainly fits with Jesus, who was the perfect representation of the Father's nature. So, if you want a hub out of which all God's other attributes radiate like the spokes of a wheel, love is surely that hub. But Calvinists are unyielding on this. They present us with a system in which, as Scottish theologian James Orr has noted, 'love is subordinated to sovereignty, instead of sovereignty to love'.¹¹⁵

Closely linked with God's sovereignty in Calvinism is his alleged obsession with his own 'glory'. Everything must 'glorify God' and failure to do so is the worst of all failings. In this system his glory, just like his sovereignty, takes precedence over his love. While he can limit his love, extending it only to the elect, he cannot, it seems, limit his self-glorification.

There is an old Calvinist saying that 'those who find themselves suffering in hell can at least take comfort in the fact that they are there for the greater glory of God.' That is an appalling statement by any measure and is incompatible with the God of love revealed in Jesus. One ex-Calvinist put it this way:

'God's desire to glorify himself had not only subsumed but consumed all his other desires, so that the only thing I understood about God was that he would glorify himself. Love, justice, and goodness had been warped beyond recognition as they were sucked into the black hole of glory.'¹¹⁶

Is he glorified by sending millions to hell? Yes, says the Calvinist. And that leads to the next challenge: if God is indeed love, it's an odd

¹¹⁴ The Eastern Orthodox Church has always held this view.

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Robert E. Olson, *Against Calvinism* (Zondervan, 2011).

¹¹⁶ Austin Fischer, *Young, Restless, No Longer Reformed: Black Holes, Love and a Journey In and Out of Calvinism* (Cascade Books, 2014, p27).

kind of love that selects, out of the mass of humanity, an apparently small proportion to be saved.

If election is God's prerogative and human choice doesn't even enter the picture, his election of some to salvation necessarily means that he elects the rest to damnation (or 'reprobation', as Calvinists like to call it). There's not much love in that. The poor souls who are non-elect stand no chance at all. They are sentenced to everlasting hell (which Calvinists believe in) for sticking to God's sovereign script! Back in the eighteenth century, John Wesley understandably called this a 'horrible decree', and there's many an 'Amen' coming from twenty-first-century hearts. Wesley commented, too, that the call to repentance and faith issued by the Calvinists' God is like a jailer calling on prisoners to leave their cells, but refusing to open the doors.

'But you're missing the point,' retorts the Calvinist apologist. 'God is under no obligation to save anybody at all, because all are wicked sinners. So the fact that he saves *any* is wonderful, and is a tribute to his amazing grace.'

That rings hollow to many, who feel that God, if he is so great, could surely have come up with a better overall approach to resolving the ills of the human condition than that. It seems short on love — at least love in any sense meaningful to us humans. God comes over as a bully, angry and concerned with his own 'glory' in a way that is anything but winsome, but who makes the concession of saving a few so that we will extol his grace. And Calvinists always seem to think they have a monopoly on the doctrine of grace. *Sola gratia* — 'by grace alone' — is not their sole prerogative, however; Christians of different persuasions give it the same central place.

Talking of grace, a key aspect of it in Calvinist thinking is, of course, election. They take that to mean God's choice, from eternity

past, of some individuals for salvation — and, necessarily, some for damnation. No-one can deny that the terminology of God's electing, or choosing, figures in the New Testament. But today, some are keen to point out that the way Calvinists see it is not the only available option. It may, in fact, have no relevance at all to whether one is 'saved' or not. One of the books of the 'So many views on...' type, mentioned earlier, offers no less than five views on election, all by evangelical Christians; so I will leave you to work through that, if this is an issue for you. For now, all you need to know is that the rigid Calvinist view is not the only one.

Are we automatons?

Then there's the 'free will' issue. Attributing everything to God's controlling power, as Calvinists do, means that human free will does not really exist. Whether it feels like it or not, we are puppets on a string. You might believe you made a free choice to do this or that but, in reality, your choice was pre-determined by God from eternity past. You are an automaton.

That doesn't sit comfortably with most people, for good reason. We all know deep down that relationship requires the freedom to give oneself to the other person. Love can't be forced. If it is forced, it just isn't love. And that applies to our relationship with God. It appears that he wants us to love him because we *choose* to love him, in response to his own love for us. For that to happen, we have to be free to choose.

Is there any way of reconciling God's sovereignty with his granting us freedom of choice? Yes, say some of Calvinism's critics. He can *sovereignly determine to limit his control of us*. And this, they add, is exactly what he has done. He has sovereignly consented to not normally interfere in either natural law (like gravity) or human

freedom.¹¹⁷ Other critics would come at it from a different angle. If God's limiting his control of us is a sovereign choice on his part, they point out, 'control' rather than 'love' remains his primary attribute: his sovereignty still logically precedes his love. And that, they insist, is not the case. Instead, love is God's primary attribute and love, by definition, is not controlling. In that case, God *cannot* choose some to salvation and others to damnation; such control would be to deny his very nature.¹¹⁸

Calvinists themselves get very technical when writing about these issues. Their arguments are of a philosophical depth to which the mind of the average Christian cannot reach. That can't be right. God, in his wisdom, knows what we are like and he has constantly shown himself concerned to reach us where we are. You can know his love without being a philosopher!

'Ah, yes,' chips in the Calvinist, 'we talk about God's love as if it were a straightforward thing, but it isn't. There are different kinds of love, and God's love for his elect is different from his love for humanity in general.' Some would go further and add that divine love has nothing in common with human love, so that we can't grasp the former by analogy with the latter. All this, in the view of many, is open to serious question, and the fact that a prominent Calvinist theologian has written a book entitled *The Difficult Doctrine Of The Love*

¹¹⁷ Bradley Jersak, in his book *A More Christlike God*, links this self-limitation to the idea of *kenosis*. This is the concept introduced in Philippians 2:7, which says that Christ 'made himself nothing' or 'emptied himself'. Jersak argues that this self-humbling, or self-limitation, is not confined to the incarnation. Rather, it is something intrinsic to the character of God that Jesus revealed and modelled.

¹¹⁸ For an exposition of this latter view, see Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love Of God* (IVP Academic, 2015).

Of God has, I suspect, done more to strengthen that questioning than to answer it.¹¹⁹

The problem of evil

Another difficulty linked to Calvinism's emphasis on God's sovereignty is the question of evil. There is a vast amount of bad stuff going on daily in our broken world. How do we explain it, and how does a good God fit in? To use the technical term, what is our theodicy?

We all know about the setback in Eden, and most Christians believe there is a devil working constantly against God's purpose of mending things. The problem is, if the buck always stops with God — which is what divine sovereignty, as taught by Calvinists, means — there is no escaping the conclusion that God is the author of evil. We instinctively know this can't be right, but the only way around the problem is to somehow water down the absoluteness of his sovereignty, or at least concede that he himself limits it in the interests of longer-term benefits. Either way, we undermine one of Calvinism's pillars. And I, for one, am content to join in the digging.

And what about prayer? If God has decreed in advance everything that will happen, as Calvinism teaches, what's the point of bringing our requests to him in prayer? Good question. If the future is fixed, our prayers are not going to change it. Again, the way Calvinists try to juggle their insistence on divine predestination and the validity of prayer is a real mind-bender, and means little or nothing to the ordinary Christian. We instinctively want to pray to our Father, and

¹¹⁹ D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine Of The Love Of God* (Crossway, 2000).

Scripture encourages us to bring our requests to him,¹²⁰ but we can hardly do so with confidence inside the Calvinist system.

The open view of the future

Calvinism has always had its opponents. They are usually grouped together and dubbed Arminians, after Jacobus Arminius, a Dutchman of the generation after John Calvin who, finding his doctrines unacceptable, systematically criticised them and replaced the central tenets with alternative ones. After his death, others worked his ideas into more of a system, known as Arminianism,¹²¹ though this never became a system of the set-in-stone kind like Calvinism. The great eighteenth-century evangelist John Wesley embraced Arminius's ideas, which are accepted today not only in the Methodist churches he founded, but across a wide spectrum of church streams and denominations.¹²² Arminianism denies that God *causes* all that happens to happen, but hold that God *foreknows* all that will happen. That, too, has its problems, but we will not go into those here.

Instead, we will note that, in more recent times, a challenge to Calvinism has come from another direction. This is known as 'the open view of the future' but is sometimes referred to as 'the open view of God', 'open theism', or 'open and relational theism'. It questions Calvinism's insistence that not only does God know everything that will ever happen, before it happens, but that he actually causes it to happen.

¹²⁰ E.g. Philippians 4:6.

¹²¹ But what came to be known as Arminianism had in fact been the standard view of Christians up to the time of Augustine (who died in 430 AD).

¹²² Including Roman Catholicism, the 'holiness' churches and most Pentecostal groups.

It holds, instead, that God has settled certain developments in advance, but he has also made his creatures free agents, so that they can make decisions that God then adjusts to. So, the future is partly settled, and partly open. One exponent puts it this way:

‘The future is to some degree *settled* and known by God as such, and to some degree *open* and known by God as such. To some extent, God knows the future as *definitely* this way and *definitely* not that way. To some extent, however, he knows it as *possibly* this way and *possibly* not that way.’¹²³

When the Bible records that God changes his mind, or regrets having done certain things, or responds to the prayers of his people, we have to explain what that means. Calvinists insist that these are anthropomorphisms. That means describing in human ways what we as humans perceive to have happened, but which didn’t really happen because God, by his very nature (as Calvinists perceive it) does not change his mind, have regrets, or truly act in response to our prayers. Most of us feel that, if this is what God is really like, he seems ever more distant and unattractive. ‘A God of eternally static certainties is incapable of interacting with humans in a relevant way.’¹²⁴ The open view, by contrast, takes these biblical statements at face value and, in so doing, presents a God who is accessible, loving and attractive.

Some open theists take things a bit further. They say that, because love is, by definition, not controlling,¹²⁵ it *never* settles things in advance. Instead, God works by influencing, drawing, seeking to

¹²³ Gregory A. Boyd, *God Of The Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Baker Books, 2000).

¹²⁴ Boyd, p18.

¹²⁵ They would quote Paul’s statement that love ‘does not insist on its own way’ (1 Corinthians 13:5 ESV). We hear of marriages where the husband is ‘a control freak’. He claims to love his wife, but we can’t believe him because we all know that love and control can’t co-exist.

persuade and other indirect methods, all of which require the response and cooperation of others. But such is the strength and tenacity of his love, that we may hope confidently that the time will eventually come when his will will indeed be done on earth, as it is in heaven.¹²⁶

The downside of the open view of the future, some would say, is that it diminishes God by reducing him to something less than the grand, sovereign God of Calvinism. That is not necessarily the case. Indeed, one could argue that the open view does the very opposite. A great deal more skill, wisdom and involvement on God's part is required to manage an open scenario than to sit back and let things happen, knowing that everything is fixed and unchangeable.

This 'open' view is also a great stimulus to Christian action. If we believe that God has truly left certain things up to us, trusting us to make wise choices and act in the practical interests of his kingdom, we can get involved with a real sense of destiny and purpose. This has been called 'collaborative eschatology'. I can make a real difference, rather than just be an actor in a film that has already been made. To me, that's anything but a wobbler!

If you have been a 'system person', the above will give you more than enough to think about. But I would encourage you to believe that life and faith outside of an institution can be infinitely more fulfilling and exciting than life inside. The doors are open. Venture out: security isn't everything.

Next, we will return to look more fully at an issue raised in this chapter: why, if God is powerful and loving, doesn't he do more to prevent evil?

¹²⁶ Thomas Jay Oord is the foremost exponent of this view. See the booklist in Chapter 20.

12 - God and Evil

Our world is troubled by a host of evils.

Your longed-for baby daughter is born with a heart-defect that will restrict her for life. An ill-secured iron girder slips off a truck on the motorway, pierces the windscreen of the car behind and decapitates the driver. A flimsy rubber dinghy arranged by people-traffickers sinks in the English Channel, drowning twenty would-be immigrants to the UK. A young lady walking home after a night out is gang-raped in a park... We could go on, but you know what I mean.

One of the main reasons that atheists give for rejecting Christianity is God's apparent failure to stop it all, or at least some of it. They have a point. How, I wonder, would *you*, as a Christian, try to explain the situation? Maybe you should pause here and think hard about it.

Traditionally, Christians have said either that God *causes* everything that happens, including the bad things, or that he *allows* everything. Neither offers much comfort to those who are suffering, and it is perhaps no surprise that these blocks are being poked quite vigorously.

When tragedy strikes

The average thinking atheist — let's choose one and call him George — usually picks up on two aspects of God's nature that Christians commonly push. The first is that God is, by definition, all-powerful; he can do literally anything. The other is that God is love.

Now, George is very fond of his grandmother. He lost his mother to cancer when he was just ten years old (why didn't God stop *that*, he has often wondered), and Gran stepped into the breach, taking her

place in many ways. She was a major stabilising factor in his upbringing. So she's very special to him.

Though in her seventies now, she remains quite fit and active, and looks after herself in her own home. One Thursday morning she takes her usual walk down to the local high street to do a bit of shopping. It's a windy day. The metal sign hanging over the door of the ironmonger's shop is swinging in the wind. It must have rusted over the years and, just as George's grandmother is walking beneath it, it snaps from its hinges, drops down and strikes her on the head, killing her outright.

Amid his tears, here are George's questions. Where was God in this? If he is in control and all-powerful, he could have prevented it from happening. But he didn't. And if he is all-loving, *why* didn't he prevent it?

If you ditch either one of the two attributes, the problem can perhaps be explained. Ditch the 'power' aspect, and maybe God didn't stop the tragedy because he couldn't. Ditch the 'love' bit, and you could say that, while he *could* have prevented it, he isn't feeling particularly loving today, so didn't bother. Or maybe Gran had been nurturing some secret sin, and this was God's punishment?

This is the way people think. So again I ask you: how would *you* answer George? Some would say it was just bad luck, but most Christians, because of their concept of God as controller, say there is really no such thing as luck. Would you agree? If so, why?

The 'healing' issue comes into the picture here. Christians have often been divided on this subject, but most would say that God certainly *can* heal, and that he sometimes *does*. But, as we agreed earlier, the plain fact is that he doesn't do it very often, even when a bunch of Christians who trust in God as the great Healer pray hard.

Is this because he *can't*, in which case he is not in control? Or is it because he is lacking in love? Neither option is any easier for believers to accept than the 'bad luck' alternative.

For that reason, many Christians fall back on the 'mystery' option. 'God's ways are greater than our ways,' they say, 'and we'll never be able to understand them fully.'¹²⁷ That may be true, but it's no comfort at all to victims of the bad things that happen every day, so we are no further forward. Others say, 'We just have to believe that, in the wisdom of God, the tragic death of George's grandmother was serving some higher purpose in the great scheme of things.' But that doesn't comfort us much, either. If God can only advance his 'great scheme of things' in harrowing ways like this, he doesn't seem very attractive.

Uncontrolling love

The block-poking on this subject comes from the school of 'open and relational theism' that we mentioned earlier, and which claims to provide a meaningful response to the problem of evil. Here's how it works.

God's essential nature is *love*. That love is not just one attribute among many; it is what God *is*. He loves us and his creation, all the time, seeking our welfare, our *shalom*. Love always makes room for the beloved; it does not control. That means God, while he is far from being a passive bystander, cannot control things and people unilaterally. Not that he *does* not, but that he *cannot*. Yes, he guides

¹²⁷ There is indeed a huge 'mystery' aspect to God and our relationship with him. He is transcendent as well as immanent. This truth, properly appreciated, will lead us to greater humility and deeper worship. But, like all truths, it can be ill-applied. Using it to dodge the questions about evil is such an ill-application.

(without dominating); he influences (without manipulating); but he cannot control.

That's an unsettling thought. How can it be true? Isn't God omnipotent, as we have all been taught? Surely, to use the word 'can't' of God is a slur on his character?

Try not to over-react here. Think about it: the Bible itself mentions several things that God can't do. He can't lie; he can't be tempted; he can't grow tired. And, most important, 'he cannot deny himself.'¹²⁸ This latter means that he can't act outside of his essential nature, and that nature is love. Therefore:

'Because God always loves and God's love is uncontrolling,¹²⁹ God cannot control. The God who can't control others or circumstances can't prevent evil singlehandedly.'¹³⁰

According to this view, the limitation comes, then, not from any outward factors, but from within, from God's own nature.

Again, the word 'limitation' doesn't sit comfortably with many of us, for whom a God subject to limitations is as inconceivable as a balloon without a skin. But it may not be as crazy a notion as it first seems. Proponents of this approach point to the passage in Philippians chapter 2, which describes how Jesus 'emptied himself' in his incarnation, becoming human and going to the cross for us. The 'emptying' idea is the Greek word *kenosis*. Over the centuries, scholars used it to argue over how both a divine nature and a human nature could combine in the one person of Jesus. More recently, however,

¹²⁸ Titus 1:2; James 1:13; Isaiah 40:28; 2 Timothy 2:13

¹²⁹ 1 Corinthians 13:5

¹³⁰ Thomas Jay Oord, *God Can't: How to believe in God and love after tragedy, abuse and other evils* (SacraSage, 2019, p26)

they have focused on *kenosis* as telling us something about the nature of God, as Jesus revealed him.

Self-giving

‘Self-giving’ is a good translation of *kenosis*. That’s what Jesus did, setting aside his own privileges and laying down his life in order to benefit and empower us. And since he is ‘the exact representation of God’s being’, we are safe in concluding that God’s love is characterised by self-giving — which implies ‘others-empowering. He empowers his creation to act freely and independently, and while he continually influences everything, he controls nothing. This has been labelled ‘essential *kenosis*’. It is part of God’s essential being.

Back to George, and his grandmother on her windy walk. Why, we wonder, didn’t God act to delay the breaking of the sign’s hinge for a second or two, until she was safely past? Or why didn’t he miraculously step in and give Gran a nudge to get her out of the way? Because he couldn’t; he does not control. And another thing: God is a living, eternal spirit. He doesn’t have a body with which to nudge her.

He does delight, however, to work *with others* to express his love. For instance, another pedestrian may have noticed the sign beginning to look dangerous and responded (knowingly or otherwise) to promptings of God’s loving concern by rushing to the old lady and pulling her out of danger. But on this occasion, sadly, nobody spotted the impending fall.

‘But surely God is a God of miracles,’ you object. ‘He doesn’t *need* us. He can intervene at will to do unusual things, can’t he?’ The view we are considering says no, he doesn’t ‘intervene’, because this implies that he normally stands on the sidelines and lets things take their course. Which he doesn’t. The weight of Scripture suggests that

God is constantly present with all of us; he is everywhere, all the time, and always intent on our welfare. When miracles take place, it is always in cooperation with people, other entities or natural forces. If he *can* intervene at will, why, if he loves, does he not do so a lot more often? Why does he heal the occasional person of cancer, but leave millions of others to succumb to it — and that often in spite of fervent prayer and faith-filled hearts?

All this raises lots of questions, and I'm sure you have at least half a dozen in mind right now. I encourage you to look into this further, and to check the booklist in Chapter 20 for the works by Thomas Jay Oord, who sets out this position in a clear and readable manner.

Prayer and miracles

Before we move on, though, let's notice how block-pokers of this ilk explain prayer and miracles.

We have mentioned miracles already. Most Christians would describe them as God's breaking in to violate one of the 'laws of nature', or as 'supernatural' activity, as distinct from 'natural'. Neither view, these block-pokers insist, fits either the biblical data or the 'essential *kenosis*' scenario. What happens instead, then? Here's a suggested answer:

'God sees all the options given our circumstances, relationships, facts, and data. God takes into account all the causes, factors, and actors in us and in each situation. Then God offers pertinent possibilities for action and empowers us to respond. God's enabling makes our response possible. God calls, commands, persuades, and inspires creatures of all complexities to choose the best among the possible.

All of this means — and this is so important — that miracles involve both God's initiating action and creaturely responses

or the conditions of creation being conducive. For miracles to occur, God's initiating and empowering action is necessary. It's the primary causal factor. But God cannot bring about miracles alone. Miracles require creaturely cooperation, or conducive conditions where cooperation is not possible.¹³¹

That cooperative element certainly fits with Paul's statement that, 'We know that in everything God works for good *with those who love him...*'¹³² The approach requires more space than we have here to open it up fully, and that's why you should investigate it for yourself.

Prayer is a little more straightforward. The future, on this understanding, is 'open'. In other words, God, while he knows what the possible *options* are in every situation, does not know what *choices* we will make until we make them. He operates 'relationally', his uncontrolling love making him subject, to a degree, to his creatures' choices and actions. That means that the petitionary praying we do really does influence him. As a result of our prayers, 'God may have alternative paths to operate in, new cooperative agents to work with, and new opportunities to influence us and others.'¹³³ And all this without controlling:

'An uncontrolling love view says petitionary prayer makes a difference without fully determining others. It says our prayers affect God without saying prayers make it possible for God to determine others fully. It says praying opens new possibilities God can use in the next moment, without saying those possibilities *guarantee* the rescuing, healing, or blessing we

¹³¹ Thomas Jay Oord, *Questions and Answers for God Can't* (SacraSage, 2020, p48)

¹³² Romans 8:28 RSV

¹³³ Thomas Jay Oord, *Questions and Answers for God Can't* (SacraSage, 2020, p28)

seek. Prayer can be a factor in the good that occurs, but it doesn't guarantee it.¹³⁴

To me, that tallies with real-life experience of prayer. We all know that prayer doesn't work like a vending machine, where you put the prayer in and the answer rolls out. We don't always get what we ask for. This scenario fits that perfectly. When things don't work out the way we ask, it's not that God is unloving or unwilling, but that people or natural agents are not responding positively to his promptings.

Maybe it's time to take a breather and chew over the implications of this chapter. You could be chewing for some time!

When you're ready, we will look at some of the topics close to the heart of the Christian message, including sin, the gospel, the kingdom of God, the atonement and justification. All these are in the process of being picked up, examined, adjusted, dusted down and set on their way again. Blocks are being poked. But you're pretty robust with all this by now, and if you have stuck with me this far, you will handle the rest without collapse.

¹³⁴ Ibid p29

13 - Sinners by Nature?

The gospel is needed because we are *sinners*. All Christians agree on that — even though the gospel is far more than just a solution to personal sin.

And many will say, if you ask how come we are sinners, that it's all Adam's fault. They may not use that phrase, but that's what it boils down to. They are referring to the doctrine usually known as 'original sin'. And yes, you've guessed it: that block is being poked.

Original sin

We all know what the Bible presents as *the* original sin: it was Adam and Eve's eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, recorded in Genesis chapter 3 — an act which God had forbidden. We call it 'the fall'. That's not a biblical phrase, so we should be careful not to over-emphasise it. Certainly, the sin in Eden never gets a single further mention in the Old Testament.

But the *doctrine* of 'original sin' is something much bigger than *the* original sin. According to one Bible dictionary it is:

'A term referring to the universal defect in human nature caused by the fall, entailing the loss of original righteousness and the distortion of the image of God.'¹³⁵

In simple terms, it holds that you and I are *born* sinners, by virtue of our physical descent from Adam. Sin is our constitutional bent. We are sinners *by nature*, not just by practice, and thus, it adds, we are under divine condemnation from the moment we are born.

¹³⁵ *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Lexham Press, 2016).

I've heard Christians comment, to a young mother trying to calm her crying baby of just a few months old, 'Amazing, isn't it? Sinful right from the start! Here's this infant, selfish and demanding even at this early age. If ever you wanted evidence for original sin, here it is!'

That doesn't bless the mother much but, to the evangelical who made the comment, the logic is irrefutable. The baby is obviously too young to understand concepts like right and wrong, so its tantrum is not a *deliberately* sinful choice. And nobody has *taught* it to act in this 'selfish and demanding' way. It's not even capable of *copying* this sinful behaviour from someone else. But it is doing it anyway. Proof positive that the doctrine of original sin is true.

Many of us have assumed this doctrine to be a fundamental of the faith. But the block-pokers remind us that it isn't. Significantly, the Eastern Orthodox Church has *never* embraced it. That branch of the church acknowledges that *death* is a result of Adam's sin — 'as in Adam all *die*...' ¹³⁶ — but not guilt or a sinful nature. Over the centuries, Christians of other persuasions have also called the doctrine into question. The fact is, until around the fifth century AD, when Augustine shaped it up, it was virtually unknown. Let that sink in: for centuries there was no 'original sin' block to poke!

Rotten from the start?

Do you believe that the Bible teaches we are rotten from the start? Is it, in fact, true that sin's infection is passed on genetically, through sexual intercourse — specifically through semen, as the doctrine teaches — making Jesus alone exempt from it? ¹³⁷ Are you comfortable

¹³⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:22

¹³⁷ In due course, the Roman Catholic Church introduced the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary: that she, too, was conceived without the

with the notion that the crying baby is fundamentally sinful, and under the wrath of God? The block-pokers look, for a start, at Genesis chapter 3 and point out that there isn't the slightest hint there that Adam's sin would infect his progeny, and they are right.

Some see possible hints of it later in the Old Testament, however. For example, as Moses descended Mount Sinai with the Law, God declared to him his own love, patience and faithfulness, but added, 'Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he *punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents* to the third and fourth generation.'¹³⁸

Many would say that this isn't relevant. It simply means that if, for example, a woman gets drunk regularly during pregnancy, her child is likely to be born with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome, whose harmful effects might carry on down the family line for the next generation or two. But if the statement does refer to original sin, does it imply that sin's infection stops after the 'fourth generation'?

Whatever it means, we noted earlier that there is *progression* in the Old Testament. Later generations of Israelites came to understand God's nature more clearly than their predecessors, often resulting in a complete overthrow of earlier beliefs. This is a case in point. The prophet Ezekiel, centuries after Moses, declared, 'The one who sins is the one who will die. *The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child.*'¹³⁹ Ezekiel was 'reimagining God'.

Looked at logically, both declarations can't be right. If these are indeed references to the classic doctrine of original sin, the later

involvement of semen. This meant that there was no sin in her to infect Jesus when he was in her womb.

¹³⁸ See Exodus 34:6-7.

¹³⁹ Exodus 18:19-20.

insight into God's nature trumps the earlier one, and thus the doctrine is undermined.

Paul, Augustine and Calvin

But the 'progression' idea, in relation to original sin, suffers a setback, some would say, when we get to the New Testament and Paul. His classic passage on the subject is Romans 5:12-19. You should pause and read it before moving on.

Clearly, in Paul's thinking here there is *some* kind of connection between Adam's sin and negative effects on the rest of us. What that connection is has been disputed. The line you take will be affected by, among other factors, whether Adam and Eve were literal individuals — the first members of the human race — or are 'ciphers' representing humanity as a whole.

While Paul almost certainly took the first view, we saw earlier that DNA evidence disputes that claim. If Paul is right, he does seem to be teaching here that some sort of harmful spiritual infection is passed on biologically. But if, instead, we consider Adam to be a cipher, we will read the passage differently. We will see it as just picturing the way human beings *are* in general, in an archetypal way.

Saint Augustine (5th century AD) took Paul in the first way. What's more, he gave the apostle's statements a sharper focus than Paul himself did. In so doing, he produced the doctrine of original sin that was accepted by the church in later generations. Then, at the Reformation (a thousand years after Augustine), John Calvin tightened it up even further.

So, we have three stages in the doctrine's development. The early church taught, and the Eastern church still does, that what we have inherited from Adam is *death*. The Western church, following Augustine, teaches that we inherit both death and *guilt*. And

Reformed Christianity, following Calvin, holds that we inherit death, guilt and a *sinful nature*. It's the latter view that most evangelicals today assume to be 'what the Bible teaches', and it's this that the block-pokers are questioning.

Interpreting Paul

Verse 12 of Romans chapter five is the key one. In the NIV it reads: 'Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned...'

Augustine worked with a Latin version of Romans. Scholars for years have pointed out that it was a bit iffy on this verse, not accurately reflecting the original Greek. As a result, Augustine took Paul to be saying it was *guilt* that was spread through Adam's transgression, whereas the verse is saying that it was not guilt, but *death*.¹⁴⁰

Then there's the little phrase 'all sinned'. Supporters of original sin, following Augustine, take it to mean that 'all sinned *in Adam's sin*'. In other words, because all subsequent generations were, so to speak, 'in' Adam, in the sense that they were his potential offspring, his sin was also theirs. He brought them down with him, even though they were as yet unborn — which seems unfair to us, to say the least.

But this, the block-pokers insist, is reading into the phrase something that isn't there. On the contrary, Paul says (in verse 14) that Adam is a 'pattern', or 'type' — he is 'typical' of all human beings. If you and I had been put in the same situation in Eden as was Adam, we would likely have sinned in the same way. The phrase 'all sinned' means just what it says: every one of us *has* sinned. No-one

¹⁴⁰ For some detail on the intricacies of this verse, see B. Witherington III, *What's in the Word: Rethinking the Socio-Rhetorical Character of the New Testament* (Baylor University Press, 2009).

denies that, and the fact that we all die proves it. But that's a far cry from Augustine's doctrine of original sin.

If we do settle for original sin, we tacitly accept that God condemns you and me for the sin of another person. Are you comfortable with that? The block-pokers are certainly not, and neither am I. It's simply unjust. It reminds me of the outrage I felt as a schoolboy years ago when, because one pupil in the class misbehaved, the teacher kept us *all* in for fifteen minutes after the end-of-school bell. It simply doesn't resonate with a God who is love, and I'm not alone in feeling that way. The Eastern church shares my misgivings. But Augustinians and Calvinists defend it with vigour.

Calvin said that our inherited sinfulness wipes out any residual traces of the image of God in us. We thus suffer from 'total depravity', the notion that every aspect of our being leans firmly towards the 'bent' side. We are rotten through and through, with no leanings at all except towards sin and evil. Yes, we may at times do a few good things, but none of them are pleasing to God, because they come from a polluted heart and thus from ulterior motives. And that polluted heart, in turn, came from Adam.

Here's a question to ponder: Adam and Eve, as created by God, didn't have a 'sinful nature' but they sinned anyway, so *why can't it just be the same for the rest of us?* Along with the block-pokers, I believe it is.

It makes a difference

'But does this kind of nit-picking make any difference to anything practical?' you may be asking, wearily.

Yes, it does. It means that when I see people who, as far as I know, don't have any sincere Christian faith, doing good things, I rejoice, and praise God for it. Indeed, I see God in it — traces of what we

might call 'original blessing'. But if I hold to original sin, I will have to write it off as 'empty good works' that cannot please God or bring any lasting benefit because they are the product of a sinful nature. Like make-up on a corpse.

I'm glad to be rid of that attitude. Instead, I can express my appreciation to the person. I could maybe even drop in the comment that, in doing the good they did, they expressed the heart of God. That could lead to a fruitful conversation!

Virtue is to be celebrated wherever we find it. All human beings do sin, of course, and they all die. But they are certainly not all rotten through and through, as Calvin taught that they are. If you reject his position, you will find yourself warming to people a lot more than you used to. You can share the gospel with them with greater confidence, rather than hitting them with 'You're a vile sinner, rotten to the core', and then expecting them to want to hear more.

And maybe that crying baby isn't demonstrating the reality of original sin; it's just making known, in the only way it can, its elemental need for food, or comfort, or relief from its colic.

As that baby grows to become a toddler, then a teenager, and eventually an adult, we will see it finding its way in life and society. It will make mistakes, it will test boundaries, it will sometimes be selfish and sometimes good and kind. It will be, in other words, a normal human being — fallible, often confused, sometimes sinful and selfish. It will eventually die. All just like Adam. But we can accept all that without needing either Augustine's doctrine of original sin or Calvin's cynical notion of total depravity.

What a relief!

14 - Gospel and Kingdom

What is the gospel?

‘Ah!’ you exclaim. ‘We’re onto the easy bit now! I know what the gospel is: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”’¹⁴¹

No-one is likely to take issue with that answer. They might, however, ask what ‘believe in’ means, what the significance is of ‘Lord’ and ‘Jesus’, and what ‘saved’ refers to — saved from what?

Some would throw in a curved ball here. What, they might ask, is the connection between ‘the *gospel*’ — which we all know means ‘good news’¹⁴² — and the four *Gospels*: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? It would seem reasonable to conclude that the ‘gospel’ is based on the ‘Gospels’, but in evangelical circles it rarely comes over that way. We tend to treat the four Gospels the way we treat the starter at a meal: a snack to nibble at before you get down to the meat, veg and roast potatoes of the main course. And that, in this analogy, would be the New Testament letters, especially those of Paul. It is certainly from those letters that we draw our common gospel preaching-texts.

But most of us don’t stop to think about such things, because we think we have the gospel sorted out in our minds. Asked to define it, we might give an answer like, ‘It’s pointing people to Jesus as Saviour so that they can accept him and go to heaven when they die.’ Or, ‘It’s telling folk that, if they trust Jesus, their sins will be forgiven.’ Or again, ‘It’s assuring people that, even though they are separated from

¹⁴¹ Acts 16:31.

¹⁴² The English word ‘gospel’ comes from the Anglo-Saxon *god-spell*, meaning ‘good story’ or ‘good news’. It reflects the Greek *euangelion*, which means much the same.

God, they can be reconciled to him through what Jesus has done.’ Or, ‘It’s telling them that, through faith in Christ, they can be born again.’

The gospel, I’m sure, has room for such answers. But not much of that features prominently in the four Gospels. Nor does it fit too well with the two major evangelistic sermons recorded in the Book of Acts: Peter’s sermon to a Jewish audience on the Day of Pentecost (chapter 2), and Paul’s sermon to pagan Gentiles in Athens (chapter 17). We won’t stop to analyse those here, but I encourage you to pause and read both sermons for yourself, comparing them with the understanding of the gospel you have become familiar with.

For simplicity you can’t beat a neat system, which is why many equate the gospel with the ‘four spiritual laws’ first made popular by Campus Crusade for Christ:

1. God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life.
2. Man is sinful and separated from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God’s love and plan for his life.
3. Jesus Christ is God’s only provision for man’s sin. Through him you can know and experience God’s love and plan for your life.
4. We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord; then we can know and experience God’s love and plan for our lives.

The two strong elements here are God’s love and his ‘wonderful plan for your life’. What do you think of that? Is it a fair description of the essence of the gospel?

The gospel and the bigger picture

Maybe we should try to back off from our received understanding of what the gospel is, clear our minds, and try to look as if with new eyes

at the great story of the Bible to discover what exactly gripped the first Christians and determined the message they proclaimed.

New Testament scholar Tom Wright has spent many years doing just that, so, rather than trying to reinvent the wheel, we will look at his conclusions and see where they take us. He is a man of deep godliness with a pastoral heart, as well as a brilliant scholar, so you should not construe his questioning of traditional views of the gospel as attempts to wobble anyone's faith. Quite the opposite: he is keen to help you keep your faith on track. What, then, in his opinion, is the heart of the gospel?

He reckons that the good news, in summary, is that *God has acted decisively in Jesus the Messiah to begin the mending of his broken world.*

To grasp what this means we need to understand what Wright calls the 'back story' — the events leading up to the Christ-event and the good news that flowed from it. This tallies with what we noted earlier about the importance of understanding the Bible's 'bigger picture'. In particular, if we are to understand Jesus and the gospel, we must get a handle on the overall story of the Old Testament, which goes something like this...

The 'back story' of the gospel

God is love and created the world to be a place suffused with his own love. His intention was that human beings, the pinnacle of his creation, would be his agents in running the world and filling it with his glorious presence. Because love cannot be forced, he gave his human creatures a freedom of will which, tragically, they used to break away from him and do their own thing. Sin started messing up human lives, and the whole created order suffered as a result.

In response, God began moving towards a solution to the problem. He made a covenant with Abraham, and with his descendants, the

people of Israel, to be with them and bless them. The aim was that they would be a living example of how great life was under God's direction, so that they would be, as Isaiah put it, 'a light for the Gentiles', exporting his blessing worldwide.

But the Israelites proved incapable of it. Indeed, instead of being the answer to the world's problem, they showed themselves to be part of it — they were sinners as much as the Gentiles, though they didn't see that for a long time. When they ended up exiled to Babylon, they thought that was the problem. But it wasn't. Even those who returned from it were still messed up, and still struggling with foreign domination. Gradually it dawned on the nation that the real issue was much deeper than exile: it was a *sin and alienation* problem, one they shared with the rest of humanity.

But God was on the case. He had promised that he would, in due course, come in person to put things right. He would do so, in fact, in the person of Israel's Messiah, his anointed King.

That Messiah was of course Jesus, who turned out to be not exactly what the people of Israel had been looking for. Far from being the military Messiah of popular Jewish expectation, who would blast the Roman occupiers of Palestine, give back the Jews their independence, put the Gentiles in their place and reign in glory from Jerusalem, Jesus announced a kingdom of a completely different kind. He would come in self-sacrificial love, not blasting the Romans but submitting to crucifixion by them — and forgiving them in the very act. Through the cross he would end the *real* exile of universal bondage to Satan, sin and death.

Then came the shock ending to Israel's long story: Jesus' *resurrection from the dead!*

The Jews had always believed that, at the end of time, God would raise everybody, but his raising of one man, Jesus, not at the end of history but in the middle of it, astounded everyone. It meant that the promised kingdom had *now arrived*, with God himself as its King, in the person of the God-man, Jesus. Here at last was one who brought all the ancient promises within reach. He had been through death and come out the other side with a glorious new body. Now he was saying to all who could accept it, 'I'm the Pioneer. I've been through the lot and emerged victorious. So, if you want the same experience, hitch your wagon to mine and I'll see you, too, through death into resurrection and the great new creation.'

This was the 'good news' that the early Christians proclaimed. 'What a King!' they said. 'We're used to hearing the Roman Emperor calling himself "Son of God" and telling us that his accession to the throne is "good news" for the empire's citizens, but all that pales into insignificance beside *this* King and his claims! *Jesus* is Lord, not Caesar!'

They announced that those who entrusted themselves and their future to King Jesus would know a deep sense of being freed from their sins and joined to Father God. They could begin, through living a life of love, as Jesus had done, to mend the broken creation. They could make the world a better place. It would be tough at times, often demanding sacrifice or even death, but they could endure that gladly because of the glorious future assured by Jesus' resurrection. And that future was that, at the right time, King Jesus would return in person to complete the job of putting the world to rights. His people would then live forever with him, not in a disembodied form in heaven, but on a totally renewed earth. That earth was one to which heaven would have come down and where, in unimaginable joy and fulfilment, they

would at last be God's agents in running his world, a world full of his glorious presence.

That is the 'good news' — the gospel! God has been faithful to his ancient promises. He is King, running the show through Jesus, who has died and risen again. The new world has begun. The future is bright: Jesus is coming again to finalise his kingdom. Get on board! Let it dawn on you that you yourself have died and risen with him — and get yourself baptised to declare your recognition of it. Become part of the new community of those already on board, who are 'infecting' the world with God's love! This is not a religion. It's not a fresh philosophy or moral system. It's news! Something has happened and things will never be the same again!

Nothing here about going to hell unless you repent. No going to heaven either, for that matter. No 'sinner's prayer' to pray. No emphasis on 'accepting Jesus as your personal Saviour'. For people with a traditional evangelical concept of the gospel, this shifting of emphasis and priorities could be a wobbler. Try not to let it affect you that way. Instead, let the excitement of it grip you and move you up a gear in your walk as a Christian. This, I believe, is good news for you as well as good news to share with everybody else.

Now we need to take a closer look at one aspect of it, seen in our use just now of the words 'King' and 'kingdom'.

The kingdom

'The kingdom of God' is not the sole property of Jehovah's Witnesses. Nor does it belong exclusively to those evangelicals who, for example, support projects to provide clean water for African villages, which they tend to label 'kingdom work' to distinguish it from what they call 'church work' or direct evangelism.

The phrase is bathed in confusion. Ask a bunch of ten Christians what the kingdom of God is, and you'll get ten different answers, most of them vague. It shouldn't be, because Jesus had a lot to say about 'the good news of the kingdom'. It's what he proclaimed.¹⁴³ So what is it, and why does it figure so little in typical evangelical talk and preaching? Not surprisingly, because 'gospel' and 'kingdom' belong together, as we try to answer these questions we will find ourselves re-walking much of the 'gospel' ground we reviewed just now.

It is fair to say that the central theme of the four Gospels is *the establishment of God's kingdom in the person of Jesus*.

In one sense, of course, God has always been King. He is the Creator, with universal rights. In the exercise of those rights he lovingly chose to share his rule over the created order with the human beings he had made. They would be his vice-regents, spreading the glories of Eden right across the world. Tragically, they abused their privileges. In particular, they used the freedom he had given them to strike out independently. Sin and alienation thus became part of the human condition. And it didn't stop there: the whole created order became polluted as a result. That's all in Genesis.

From that point on God began the process of working towards regaining control of his world. How did he do that? Here we do a quick reprise of part of the 'bigger story' outlined above. He revealed himself to Abraham and, eventually, to his descendants, the nation of Israel, who would be, we might say, his foot in the door to reach human society at large. As they lived and flourished under his kingship, they would attract the Gentiles to him. Sadly, the Jews failed dismally. Instead of exporting the King's blessings they hogged them to themselves and despised the Gentiles as unclean outsiders.

¹⁴³ E.g. Matthew 4:23; 9:35.

Far from being the solution to a broken world's condition, they proved to be part of the problem. God, however, was not deterred. Committed as he was to remaining faithful to his promises to Abraham — that he would bless the *whole world* through him — he was going to see his plan through, albeit by an unexpected route.

The prophets and psalmists of Israel began to receive insights into that route, which had 'kingdom' contours. The time would come, they predicted, when God would *intervene in person*, directly, to assume kingship over his world once more. Exactly how, they left rather vague. Alongside this, another prophetic line emerged that took a slightly different approach: God would do it through *someone else*, an Anointed One, a Messiah, a Son, a King of his appointing.

Daniel and the kingdom

The prophet Daniel painted colourful word-pictures of the build-up to it. The great multi-metal statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Daniel chapter 2) foretold four great kingdoms, or empires, that would dominate the known world. In hindsight we recognise them as the Babylonian, the Medo-Persian, the Greek and the Roman empires. And then, Daniel declared, 'In the time of those kings, *the God of heaven will set up a kingdom* that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure for ever.'

To drive the message home, in chapter 7 Daniel presents the same basic scenario, but this time under the figure of four beasts, representing the same four consecutive empires. And again, hard on their heels, comes the kingdom of God: 'In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was

led into his presence.¹⁴⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and *his kingdom* is one that will never be destroyed.’

This is the kind of message that fired up God’s ancient people, and as the centuries passed, the level of expectation among the Jews rose ever higher. At the popular level it crystallised into the belief that the Messiah would be a strong military commander who would expel the Romans from Palestine. He would restore to the Jews their independence and then rule over a grateful nation from Jerusalem. The exile would at last be over. The Temple worship would operate without restriction, the law of Moses would be honoured and obeyed by all, and the nation would prosper to the point of making the Gentiles jealous of its glories. ‘Kingdom’ was in the air. By the time of Jesus everybody was thinking about it, and most were talking about it, too.

The King is born

It was into such an atmosphere of messianic expectation that Jesus was born. No surprise, then, that when he began his ministry and came to public attention, people eyed him up as potentially the Messiah they were looking for. That’s why Jesus was careful not to let his disciples tell people that he was Israel’s Messiah, or was cagey about it when pressed by Jewish leaders. He didn’t want the crowd grabbing him and trying to force him into a politico-military role he had no intention of playing.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ A reference, not to his second coming, but to his ascension.

¹⁴⁵ E.g. Matthew 16:20; John 10:24. And especially John 6:15, which says, ‘Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.’

Jesus was indeed God's Messiah, God's Son, God's anointed King. But he proclaimed — and embodied — a *totally different style* of kingship. His kingdom would be based on love and forgiveness — even for enemies (which meant, in context, the Romans). It would emphasise healing, renewal and the restoration of *shalom*. It would demonstrate that God had never given up on the world he had created. It would bring healing to it, so that 'as in heaven, so on earth' would become a reality. Wherever Jesus went he had exactly that effect. He left behind him a trail of restored, healed and forgiven people who felt themselves affirmed and valuable in God's sight. He was the living embodiment of the kingdom; when he told his disciples, 'The kingdom of God is among you'¹⁴⁶ he was referring to himself.

The crunch came when his enemies, both Jewish and Gentile, combined to condemn him to death. At this point he put into practice his own kingdom-teaching that we should love our enemies. He submitted to the cross, calling down on his torturers, not fire and brimstone, but his Father's forgiveness. In a way too deep and mysterious for the likes of us to fathom, all the world's evil came together to crush him, and he somehow absorbed into himself its full force. The Messiah, the King, crucified!

This was a devastating blow to those of his followers (most of them, it seems) who still held on to the traditional Jewish expectations of what Messiah would do. The two on the road to Emmaus were typical: 'We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel,' they said, thoroughly dejected.¹⁴⁷ Even the Twelve plunged into despondency. The bottom had dropped out of their lives with their dashed expectations. 'Ah well,' they might have said, 'it was

¹⁴⁶ Luke 17:21.

¹⁴⁷ Luke 24:21.

great while it lasted. We expected something more glorious, but we clearly got it wrong.’

Easter!

That was Friday, but then came Sunday! The resurrection changed everything!

The miserable and disheartened disciples bounced back with joy and glory. They saw Jesus time after time. They talked with him, touched him and ate with him. For six weeks they enjoyed his company, giddy with delight that Jesus was alive and back with them.

Have you ever wondered what they talked about with him during that time between his resurrection and ascension? The Scripture tells us: ‘He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about *the kingdom of God*.’¹⁴⁸ That was his subject because his ascension would be the final stage of the kingdom’s inauguration. In anticipation of that he told his followers, ‘*All authority* in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’ His position as King of God’s kingdom had been ratified by his resurrection. Now he would leave them, soon to be empowered by the Holy Spirit whom he would send, to ‘make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.’

In this way the long-promised kingdom of God became a reality. Jesus Christ is Lord, King, Boss over all the nations of the world. That is *the Number One* thing in the Bible, in history and in the purpose of God. It takes the top spot. It is the central truth of all. It is at the heart of the good news.

Yet evangelicalism has side-lined it, downplayed it, neglected it, relegated it to the ‘minor doctrine’ list, almost forgotten it. What a

¹⁴⁸ Acts 1:3.

tragedy! Let's get it back where it belongs, preaching it and teaching it with enthusiasm. And if for you that involves some tower-wobbling, see it as like a trip to the dentist's: uncomfortable, even painful, but worth it for the long-term comfort afterwards.

You may be thinking, 'I always thought it was the cross that was the central thing.' In one sense that is true, but it only becomes an issue if we separate the cross from the kingdom. And that we should never do, because the two belong together. It was through Jesus' suffering on the cross that he established the kingdom; suffering and glory cannot be divided. That was true for Jesus, and it will be true for us as we become agents of the kingdom's growth and progress.

Like our Lord, we will be called upon to lay down our lives in one way or another, to suffer rather than take up arms, in order that further degrees of glory may be revealed. But we can handle that in the knowledge that, in due course, the King himself will return to put the finishing touches to his wondrous kingdom. In the meantime, our labour is not in vain in the Lord. Our every act of kindness, every healing prayer, every step we take to make the world a better place, every helping hand, every act of service will produce something of eternal value that will find a place in that glorious kingdom.

Having mentioned the cross just now, we need to return for a closer look, and that's where we will go next.

15 - The Atonement

What Jesus accomplished on the cross is commonly called ‘the atonement’. Etymologically the word means ‘at one -ment’, the reconciling of God and sinners (so that they are ‘at one’), but I am using it here in its broader sense of what Christ’s death achieved, and how. You may think that this is such a key aspect of Christian belief and so firmly settled that there’s nothing about it to debate. You would be wrong. This block of the tower has perhaps been poked more than most.

Down the centuries there have been several ‘atonement theories’, each coming in and out of fashion more than once.¹⁴⁹ If you are an evangelical the chances are that you have been taught some form of the ‘penal substitution’ theory (sometimes called the Latin theory) and have been unaware of the existence of alternatives. Interestingly enough, this is the view that has been most under scrutiny in recent times, so you need to understand what it teaches, why some are unhappy with it, and what are the alternatives.

At its most basic, it holds that God had to punish people for their sin, but Jesus took their place and God punished him instead.

The whole framework is a legal one, built around God as Judge, crime (sin), law, debt-payment and punishment. This legal mind-set was prominent in the Middle Ages, which is when this view of the atonement began to take shape.

¹⁴⁹ It is probably fair to say that the New Testament does not have a fully worked-out and watertight doctrine of the atonement. Instead, it approaches the mystery of it through several interlocking ideas and metaphors which sometimes overlap but often don’t. For a summary of the different atonement theories see Tony Jones, *Did God Kill Jesus?* (HarperOne, 2015). See also Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor* (Collier Books, 1969, p78).

The word ‘penal’, of course, means ‘relating to punishment’. It shares a root with the word ‘penalty’. And ‘substitution’ means one person taking the place of another. In broad terms, then, ‘penal substitution’ sees Jesus as dying in our place, *his* death being the penalty God required as punishment for *our* sin. You are probably nodding now, saying ‘Amen to that’, and wondering what the problem is, because you have always understood that to be exactly what the Bible teaches.

Penal substitution

Let’s take ‘substitution’ first, as it is the least controversial part.

Most Christians would agree that Jesus, when he suffered, in some sense *took our place*. We recall, for instance, the Passover in Egypt, when the eldest son in an Israelite house looked at the lamb’s blood on the doorpost and lintel and said, ‘Thanks to that lamb, I’m still alive. It died in my place.’ Then we remember that Jesus was ‘our Passover lamb’¹⁵⁰ and ‘the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’,¹⁵¹ and it’s easy enough to see him dying on the cross in our place — as our substitute.

Then there’s the famous passage in Isaiah 53, which undoubtedly foretold Christ’s sufferings: ‘He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities...and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.’ Tom Wright has shown clearly that Jesus himself conceived of his coming death in terms of that key chapter.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ 1 Corinthians 5:7.

¹⁵¹ John 1:29.

¹⁵² In his book *Jesus And The Victory Of God*.

The ‘penal’ bit is not so easy, and that’s why the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement has to be handled with care.¹⁵³ Some have mixed in some questionable ingredients, to say the least. For instance, they have introduced the idea of *appeasement*. This is the notion that, at the cross, God vented his wrath on Jesus, punishing him for our sins. They thus portray God as violent and bloodthirsty, like so many ancient tribal deities whose savage wrath had to be appeased. Worse still, he took it out on an innocent sacrificial victim: Jesus.¹⁵⁴ That element has dangerous implications, because if God can use violence to solve problems, it legitimises our own use of it. And that’s not just playing with words. Over the centuries many have used this argument to justify their own violence. Within my own lifetime ‘liberation theologians’ more than once urged African leaders to go to war against apartheid South Africa on the grounds that, if God at the cross used violence to get good results, we can do the same.

We saw earlier, however, that non-violence was a key aspect of Jesus’ teaching and that, as the ‘exact representation’ of God’s being, he showed God to be non-violent, too. If that is true — and I believe it is — then God did not in fact punish Jesus. Instead, it was the wrath of *human beings* that crushed Jesus, as all the powers of evil, sin, death and destruction somehow converged on him as he suffered and died. God permitted it and used it, for sure, but that’s different from saying that God punished him. It was not God who *caused* his sufferings and death, but sinful human society, represented by the Jewish and

¹⁵³ It is worth bearing in mind that the penal substitution view of the atonement grew up in the medieval church on the back of the ideas of ‘payment’ due to God, and penance.

¹⁵⁴ British Christian leader Steve Chalke caused a rumpus some years ago when he used the expression ‘cosmic child abuse’ to describe this.

Roman leaders of the time. Think that through, because it's a key point.

It's interesting that, in Isaiah 53, the prophet raises this very issue. 'He took up our pain,' he says, referring prophetically to Jesus, 'and bore our suffering'. Then he adds, 'Yet *we considered him punished by God*, stricken by him, and afflicted.' And we were mistaken to do so, he implies. Yes, 'the punishment that brought us peace was on him', but this was never a punishment from God, intended for us but which fell instead on Jesus. Isaiah is saying that God *used* the capital punishment that *the world* inflicted unjustly on Jesus to accomplish a work of healing in us. If you look carefully into this you will find some Bible verses that could possibly be given a 'punishment from God' spin, but only by reading into them what is not essentially there. We need to exercise 'wisdom' here.

More objections to penal substitution

Another questionable area of penal substitution is that of *accumulated merit*. During the Middle Ages the idea grew that outstandingly good works could somehow build up an 'account' of spiritual merit. This merit could be transferred from one person to another, like currency. On this view, Christ, by his perfect life of obedience, accumulated a vast bulk of merit which he was able to use to pay off humanity's debt to God.

This again is a very dubious notion, without scriptural support. But it fits tidily with the medieval Roman Catholic view of the atonement, which was as close to a 'system' as one could get, and which was couched chiefly in legal terms like justice, debt, payment and satisfaction. Interestingly, while at the Reformation Luther turned his back on all that and reverted to the older *Christus Victor* view (which we will come to), Calvin stuck with the Latin view with only minor

modifications, which is why penal substitution, including some of its dubious bits, forms part of the Calvinistic belief-system today.

Those opposed to penal substitution have more objections than these. They point out, for instance, that it *makes God subject to a particular view of how justice operates*, whereas, as God, he is subject to neither that nor any other view. It also presents *God's motive as primarily anger rather than love* — his love for sinners becomes the *result* of his appeased anger, whereas John 3:16 famously states that his love for them was the *cause* of his giving his Son.

Penal substitution also gives *undue emphasis to hell* as the destination Jesus' death saves us from. It *distorts the Trinity* by pitting Father and Son against each other — the loving Son stepping in to shelter us from the angry Father. And it is *fundamentally unjust*: an innocent person should surely not be punished for the sins of the guilty.

In view of these important caveats, I myself can go along with penal substitution in broad terms only, taking care to avoid the dubious aspects often attached to it. You must decide for yourself what your own position will be.

What, then, are the alternatives? Maybe that's the wrong question. Rather than feel we have to choose one option and reject the others we should, I suggest, be willing to admit that what Jesus achieved at Calvary was so colossal that no one 'theory' can successfully describe it. Rather than either/or it is both/and. I say 'both' because, while there are several theories of the atonement, two have become more prominent than the rest, and I want to keep things fairly simple

here.¹⁵⁵ We have looked at one of those, so now let's examine the other.

'*Christus Victor*'

The main theory of the atonement down the centuries has been called 'the Classic view', 'the Dramatic view' or, most commonly, the *Christus Victor* view. As you can guess, that Latin phrase means 'Christ is victorious', and it is the title of a book on the subject by Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulén, first published in 1931.

But this view is much older than that. It can be traced back, in fact, to the very early days of the Christian church, and was the main view for the first thousand years, reflecting its prominence in the New Testament. One key way in which it differs from the Latin view is that, in the latter (penal substitution), the atonement is a payment made to God on man's behalf by Christ *as a man*, whereas in the Classic view (*Christus Victor*) the atonement is a work of *God himself* from start to finish.

It is a story of conflict and victory. God, in Jesus, takes on the evil powers of the world, triumphs over them in his death, and in this way reconciles the world to himself.¹⁵⁶ As Paul puts it, 'Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.'¹⁵⁷

Let's take a moment to look at this more closely. The key background factor is that we live in a cosmic war-zone. God is ranged against the usurping forces of evil that have seized his world. Satan

¹⁵⁵ I have opted not to consider the more marginal options like the Moral Exemplar view of the atonement, and the more recent Scapegoat view of René Girard.

¹⁵⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:19.

¹⁵⁷ Colossians 2:15.

— whether you see him as a personal entity or not — is a force to be reckoned with, supported as he is by minions both human and spiritual. These include what the New Testament calls ‘the principalities and powers’ or ‘powers and authorities’. Together, they spoil God’s good creation and hold human beings in many forms of bondage.

It is this confederacy of evil that Jesus came to conquer. By his death he succeeded in driving out ‘the prince of this world.’ He achieved his aim, which was to ‘destroy the devil’s work’ and to ‘break the power of him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil’, and in so doing he was able to ‘free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.’¹⁵⁸

This great theme of Jesus’ defeat of the cosmic enemies pervades the New Testament. As *the Victorious Christ* he has ‘disarmed’ them and ‘made a public spectacle of them’. This is the scenario of a Roman general, back in Rome after distant conquests of Rome’s enemies, parading his royal captives through the streets, naked and bound in chains, on their way to execution. They could still kick and bite, so Roman spectators lining the route had to be careful. But it wouldn’t be for long. In a similar way, Calvary was the scene of Christ’s great conquest. The forces of evil were beaten there and are on the way to their ultimate destruction, on the day he returns to consummate his kingdom. In the meantime, they can do us damage if we are not careful. But their fate is sealed. They are on their last legs.

Read the New Testament with this conquest in mind and you’ll wonder how you missed its centrality before. It’s on virtually every page. Even before his death Jesus embodied the defeat of these evil forces. He dealt them a blow every time he healed the sick, raised the

¹⁵⁸ John 12:31; 1 John 3:8; Hebrews 2:14-15.

dead, crossed social barriers to touch the unclean and the lepers, ignored patriarchal restrictions on women, hob-nobbed with the riff-raff of society or cast aside stifling religious taboos. And in all such acts he exemplified his unbounded love and that of the Father whose image he was. He loved even his enemies, submitting to crucifixion at their hands and forgiving them even as they drove in the nails.

He was the victorious Christ, and he conquered through love alone!

The element of mystery

How does all this gel with the penal substitutionary view? It agrees that Jesus died as our substitute and bore our guilt by *willingly* experiencing the full force of the powers of evil.¹⁵⁹ He thus felt the full consequences of sin that we otherwise would have felt. But it does not accept that, in some literal kind of way, our sin was transferred onto Jesus, nor does it accept that he placated an angry God's wrath. God's anger never burned against Jesus. Instead, God allowed the agents of evil to have their way with Jesus and turned it round for good.

This was the way God 'hooked' the devil, to use a picture used by some of the fathers of the church. Others even used the imagery of trickery: Jesus, in collusion with the Father, voluntarily offered himself as 'bait'. The devil saw him as easy pickings, and used wicked men to crush him at Calvary. But Satan, failing to see that this was in fact the God-man, was shaken to the core by his resurrection. God had pulled a fast one on him! The devil had been foiled and defeated; 'Christus' was 'Victor'! We, slaves that we were, had been set free!

A redemption-payment made to buy a slave out of slavery is called a ransom. Part of Christ's victory was in coming up with the money,

¹⁵⁹ See John 10:18.

so to speak. According to Paul, ‘Jesus Christ...gave himself as a ransom for all people.’¹⁶⁰

Here, however, is where we need to be careful. I referred above to our tendency to want things neat and tidy, to get our doctrines into a clear system with every ‘i’ dotted and every ‘t’ crossed. Apply that to the Bible’s ‘ransom’ imagery and you get problems. Ask, for instance, ‘To whom did Jesus pay the ransom to secure our freedom?’ Presumably to the devil, we conclude, since it was he who held us enslaved. But nowhere in Scripture will you find that stated, and few Christians would hold that position. This question is inappropriate. Let’s make way for an element of mystery here. The great and glorious truth is that once we were slaves and now we are free, and it was Jesus who got us out! Beyond that we ought not to trespass — we are into the realm of the unfathomable.

Being ‘in Christ’

The ‘atonement wars’ underscore the importance of not pressing too hard to discover the fine details of ‘what the Bible teaches’ on the subject, because its *primary* lessons are clear and plain. They lie like nuggets of gold on the surface. If you dig too deep in trying to unearth every scrap of associated doctrine you will find the walls of your dig collapsing in and crushing you. You will be up to the neck in a system again. So don’t do it.¹⁶¹ Don’t let the poking of blocks that this look at atonement-theory represents shake you beyond recovery. Be content to pick up the nuggets, pocket them as your own and go on your way rejoicing. Be content to let the rest remain a mystery.

¹⁶⁰ 1 Timothy 2:5-6.

¹⁶¹ It is interesting that none of the great creeds of the Christian church gives attention to the mechanics of the atonement, and over the centuries none of the seven great ecumenical councils dealt with it either.

One of those nuggets is the wonder of being ‘in Christ’, as Paul so often puts it. Some Bible versions render the phrase ‘in *union with Christ*’, which is clearly what it means.

As by faith you embrace all that Jesus is and all he has achieved, you are ‘united’ with him, joined to him in a deep spiritual union. That has enormous implications. It means that just as he died, you too died ‘in him’, and were also raised to life with him. You expressed this when you submitted to baptism. You are, even now, living life with a resurrection quality, partaking in God’s new world, the ‘new creation’.¹⁶² You get to taste, here and now, titbits from the loaded table from which you will feast in full at the messianic banquet when Jesus returns.¹⁶³ His victory is your victory as you master your weaknesses and push through life’s setbacks, even if you die in the process.

Being ‘in Christ’ also means that your everyday lifestyle will reflect the kind of life he lived during his own time on earth. Like him, you will live a life of love, reach out to the needy, do all in your power to ease the pain of others, forgive, affirm, heal, mend and restore. Like him, you will leave behind you a trail of people who are better off for your having passed by. You will see yourself as able, by the Holy Spirit’s power, to be God’s agent in helping make this broken world what he intends it one day to be, when his glory will fill it as the waters cover the sea.

And as you live this way you will see death robbed of its sting. Ageing, sickness and death remain a reality, but you will see beyond them to the day when, through resurrection, you will have a body like

¹⁶² See 2 Corinthians 5:17.

¹⁶³ See Hebrews 6:5.

that of the Jesus with whom you are united,¹⁶⁴ in which you will enjoy him and his new world to the full.

Making a difference now

Why, if all this is true, do so many professing Christians live lives no different from those of their non-Christian neighbours? Surely becoming a believer in Jesus and living a transformed life belong together?

One strength of the *Christus Victor* view of the atonement is that it encourages an *active outworking of our union with Christ*. It makes it difficult to separate what Jesus has done *for* us from what he is doing *in* us by his Spirit. The wonder of it somehow gets inside us and impels us to live a Christ-like life.

By contrast, the penal substitution view can separate the two, especially when seen as a legal, doctrinal framework. One feature of all things legal is ‘the letter of the law’ — the wording of legal propositions that nit-picking lawyers argue over. Those propositions can become more important than the life-issues they represent. That explains how the traditional evangelical gospel can sometimes come across as a series of doctrinal items to assent to. Tick the ‘Yes, I’m a sinner’ box. Tick the ‘Jesus died for me’ box, the ‘Accept him as Saviour’ box, and so on.

On this basis, ‘becoming a Christian’ can end up as just an assent to the propositions, with little or no effect on everyday living. That is why so many who have at some point ‘got saved’, answered the ‘altar call’ or ‘prayed the sinner’s prayer’ live lives indistinguishable from those of their ‘unsaved’ friends. But conscious union with the

¹⁶⁴ Philippians 3:21.

victorious Jesus is a constant spur to live out its intensely practical implications. Is that your experience?

'Imputation' in doubt

Being 'in Christ' also needs to be embraced as an alternative to one of penal substitution's questionable elements: *imputation*. This block is being widely poked at present.

Calvinists, in particular, make much of this doctrine. They hold that God 'imputed' our sins (or, more strictly, the sins of the elect) to Christ, meaning that God *transferred them to his account*. You might say that in the filing cabinet of heaven there was a record-card with our name at the top and, underneath it, the long list of sins we had committed. It was the bill payable to God, the debt. It was what we owed. But God deleted our name from the top and wrote in its place the name of Jesus, so that he became liable; he was now responsible for paying the bill. He paid it in full, the teaching goes, by his death.

Then God did something similar, but in reverse. From the filing cabinet he pulled out Jesus' own record card, with his name at the top. Underneath was no list of sins, because he was sinless, and the sins of ours that had been put to his account had been paid off, so there was nothing on the debit side of the record-sheet. On the credit side, by contrast, were the unlimited virtues of Jesus. Then, the idea goes, God deleted Jesus' name from the top and wrote ours instead. The righteousness of Jesus was thus 'imputed' to us, or put to our account. In the sight of God, the Judge, we are thus in the clear, debt-free. Some have called this 'the great exchange'.

It's an appealing picture and I admit to having taught along those lines myself in years gone by. But I couldn't do it now, because I believe it goes well beyond anything that Scripture presents. The only Bible verse used to support it is 2 Corinthians 5:21, which in the NIV

says, ‘God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.’ There isn’t space to go into the exegesis of this verse here, but scholars today commonly give it a quite different interpretation, seeing it, in its context, as a statement about Paul’s apostolic ministry rather than anything to do with imputation.¹⁶⁵ If that’s a wobbler for you I encourage you not to worry. You can throw out imputation completely and lose nothing of the good news, which has other facets equally or more glorious than that.

The fact is, Paul’s doctrine of *what is true of those who are ‘in Christ’* does the job that the Reformed emphasis on the imputation of Christ’s righteousness has traditionally done. After his death, Jesus was vindicated by God as Messiah by the resurrection. By faith you are ‘in’ Christ, ‘in’ the Messiah; therefore, you too have died and been resurrected. According to Romans 6, when God looks at the baptised Christian, he sees them ‘in Christ’. But Paul nowhere says that he sees us clothed with the earned merits of Christ. He sees us within the *vindication* of Christ, that is, as having died with Christ and risen again with him.

What a glorious truth this is, that we are ‘in Christ’, by which we partake of his death, his resurrection, his ascension-life and his victory! In his incarnation he came where we were and, through his atoning work, we are raised to where he is. That’s a ‘great exchange’ enough for me — and, I trust, for you.

¹⁶⁵ Wright translates the verse as follows: ‘The Messiah did not know sin, but God made him to be sin on our behalf, so that in him we might embody God’s faithfulness to the covenant.’ The ‘we’ refers, in context, to Paul and his fellow-apostles.

Blood sacrifice

Just one more feature of atonement to look at before we move on: *the shedding of blood*.

Evangelicals will be familiar with the Old Testament sacrificial system and the blood-sacrifices in their millions that turned the Tabernacle, and later the Temple, into religious abattoirs. The book of Hebrews, in particular, looks at all this in some detail and applies the typology to Jesus. Perhaps the most oft-quoted verse from Hebrews (9:22) states: ‘Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.’ Jesus shed his own blood on the cross, for sure, and that is at the heart of the atonement. *God favours blood-shedding*, then; it is evidently central to his redemptive plan. Now brace yourself: some doubt that very much!

For a start, they point out that the key statement, ‘Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness’ is, in context, simply a description of the way the temporary Old Testament sacrificial system functioned. It is not saying, ‘This is the fundamental way *God* works.’ While the author of Hebrews uses sacrificial *language*, he is not necessarily *condoning the practice* of requiring sacrificial victims. God in fact wants an end to that and, indeed, to all violence and bloodshed. But Jesus came into a real-life situation in Israel — which shared with all the nations around it the practice of blood sacrifices — and accomplished his saving work *in that context*. It’s yet another case of his condescending to meet people where they are.

We could say that, to end the blood-sacrifice system, Jesus became part of it. As Michael Hardin puts it:

‘For God to reveal the hideous character of violence and victimage there are only two options: join with the victimizer, which brings nothing to revelation, or become the victim.’¹⁶⁶

In Jesus he took the latter course, dying ‘once for all’ to put an end to the whole violent, bloody system.

There’s one other point to make about all this. In Hebrews *it is not God who cruelly puts Jesus to death*. Nor, incidentally, is it the Jewish and Roman mobs — though this is where the rest of the New Testament places the blame. No, in a surprising attribution of dual roles to Jesus, the author of Hebrews portrays him not just as the victim but also as the offerer: Jesus offers *himself!*

Here we have the language of *self-giving*, which in one sense subverts the whole sacrificial system in its traditional form. Jesus is not a passive victim like the bulls and goats but *intentionally* lays down his life out of love for us. And if further evidence were needed that blood-sacrifice is not God’s desire, we have the exegesis, in Hebrews 10:8-10, of Psalm 40, with its clear declaration that ‘Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings *you did not desire*, nor were you pleased with them.’ Jesus, in laying down his life, has brought that whole ghastly system to a decisive end. He has been into it and through it, and has cleaned out the whole thing from the inside.

Everything we have considered in this and the previous chapter conspires to challenge the rather simplistic, watered-down version of the gospel most of us have been used to. Rather than cause your faith to shake, I suggest it should do the opposite, by opening up new vistas of understanding to you and giving you a message of far greater substance to share with others. Can you rise to that challenge?

¹⁶⁶ Michael Hardin, *The Jesus Driven Life* (JDL Press, 2nd Edition, 2013, Appendix A).

16 - Justification and All That

Christian theology has a big collection of technical terms, many of them ending in -tion, like redemption, sanctification and justification. I prefer to avoid them whenever possible and use shorter, simpler terms for the sake of clarity. But there are times when a bit of technical talk is unavoidable, and we have to use the longer words. We need to do that right now with ‘justification’, because it has been the focus of much attention in recent years and its traditional meaning has been widely challenged.

I warn you here that this chapter will get a bit technical. It will look at some Greek words, for example, and their nuances. If this sort of thing is not for you, feel free to skip over to the next chapter.

What do you think ‘justification’ means? In everyday talk we say, for example, ‘Fred criticised the Town Council for doing this or that, but there was no *justification* for his objection.’ We mean his criticisms had no solid basis: he wasn’t ‘justified’ in saying what he did. But such everyday usage is not our focus here. We are concerned with the word’s use as a theological term in a Christian context.

You will doubtless have come across the phrase ‘justification by faith’, which the sixteenth-century Reformers trumpeted in opposition to the Roman Catholic teaching that our own ‘good works’ are what earn us salvation. In this setting, the word means something like ‘being put right with God’, which, the Reformers insisted, is a gift from him received only through faith in Jesus and which can never be earned. Fair enough. In this broad sense, to be ‘justified’ was simply a synonym for ‘saved’, ‘redeemed’, ‘put right with God’ or ‘born again’.

Today that way of using the term has become so widespread that most don't realise that the apostle Paul, who employs it regularly in his letters, uses it in a quite different way. And that is dangerous. If by 'justification' Paul means one thing and we, in our use of it, mean something else, we are heading for problems. Biblical scholars, in recent years, have drawn attention to this anomaly and sought to correct it. N.T. Wright has been at the forefront of this activity and, in so doing, has drawn the wrath, in particular, of some prominent Calvinists. The exchange of fire still breaks out now and then, so you need to be aware of it and its implications for what you believe and the way you talk about it.

'Just' and 'righteous'

The 'justification' issue is all tied up with related ideas emerging from the work of Protestant scholars¹⁶⁷ on aspects of Paul's understanding of the gospel. The broad term used to describe these ideas is 'the new perspective on Paul' (NPP).

The NPP has taken some time to percolate into the awareness of Christians at large, but its influence is growing rapidly. Some of its ideas, in the background for a long time, are now becoming mainstream. Others stem from more recent research into the Greek of the New Testament and the first-century Judaism from which Paul came.

The word 'just' as an adjective commonly means 'fair' or 'right'. We say, 'He got his just desserts', meaning he reaped what he had sown. It's the opposite of 'unjust', which means 'unfair', 'out of proportion' or 'not appropriate in the circumstances'.

¹⁶⁷ Chiefly E.P. Sanders, James D.G. Dunn and N.T. Wright. It is Wright who has done most to popularise these ideas.

‘Righteous’ in English is a different word entirely, but it has a link with ‘just’. I know, to look at them you would never think the two words had anything in common. But in the Greek of the New Testament there is a single word¹⁶⁸ which, in our English Bibles, is sometimes translated ‘just’ and sometimes ‘righteous’. The fact that the translators have to choose indicates that its meaning is a slippery concept to handle and doesn’t fit comfortably with English vocabulary.

The Reformers, back in the sixteenth century, got caught up in this. They saw, correctly, that as sinners we are all ‘unrighteous’, which, they said, alienates us from God because he is holy. Our need, therefore, was for the opposite moral quality: ‘righteousness’. We needed to find some mechanism whereby we could be ‘made righteous’ or, as they put it, *‘justified’*. And that, they concluded, was through Jesus, whose righteousness could, by faith, be ‘imputed’ to us, making us acceptable in God’s sight. We could thus be ‘justified by faith’. For them, to justify meant ‘to *make* righteous’, and it happened to us, they believed, when the righteousness of Jesus, or of God, was somehow transferred to us.

As we have seen, biblical scholars have been questioning this ‘imputation’ idea. Their misgivings have not been about the fact that, through faith in Jesus, we can be reconciled to God, but about *the way this comes about*.

A legal status

They have jettisoned the whole ‘imputation’ idea as foreign to Paul’s thinking, but they have also clarified the biblical meaning of ‘justify’.

¹⁶⁸ The Greek word is *dikaios*.

It does not in fact mean ‘to *make* righteous’ but ‘to *declare* righteous’ — and that’s a bigger difference than you might think.

‘Justify’ is law court language. A judge has a plaintiff bringing a charge against, say, a neighbour who he claims has moved his boundary-stone. That neighbour is the defendant, who denies the charge. The judge listens to them both, asks questions, then pronounces the verdict. Let’s suppose he goes with the defendant’s line. He declares him ‘Not guilty’ and the man walks from court ‘justified’, without a stain on his character. *That is true even if, in reality, he did move the boundary-stone.* Justification, then, is not to do with whether or not a person is actually guilty, but with his legal status. In our case, through faith in Jesus, we are declared ‘not guilty’. We are ‘in the clear’. We know, of course, that in reality we are sinners — we did move the boundary stone, and lots more besides. So how can God justify us — declare us righteous — against all the evidence?

The short answer is ‘because he is God’ and delights to forgive! But there’s a longer answer, too. To grasp it, we need to appreciate that Paul, in his thinking about all this, always has in mind the end of time and the final judgment. The Bible has much to say about this and, to the surprise of many, its consistent message is that the Lord will judge us all *in line with the kind of life we have lived.*

Now the great battle-cry of the Reformation was that we are put right with God *by faith.* It reflected the wonder of the discovery that salvation was not, as the mediaeval Catholic Church taught, something earned by good works or acts of penance, but was a gift of God’s pure grace, received with the empty hands of faith. We rightly continue to believe this without reservation.

Faith and ‘works’

In their understandable reaction against anything that smacks of ‘works’, however, Protestants have found difficulty with Paul’s statements that seem to give at least some room for ‘works’ in the Ultimate Assize at Christ’s return.

Such statements are particularly embarrassing in Romans, the letter they usually tout as a treatise on *sola gratia* (by grace alone) and *sola fide* (by faith alone). But there Paul, speaking of the day of judgment, clearly says:

‘God “will repay each person *according to what they have done.*” To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who *does evil*: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honour and peace for everyone who *does good*: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.’¹⁶⁹

What do you make of that? We should take Paul’s words at face value and not shuffle uncomfortably and ignore them, or try to fudge their meaning. God’s final judgment, he says, will be in accordance with *the life a person has led* — in accordance, in other words, with their works. Jesus himself taught along the same lines.¹⁷⁰

How can we square that with ‘not by works’ in Ephesians 2:8-9? A balancing factor here is important. As Wright observes:

‘The “works” in accordance with which the Christian will be vindicated on the last day are not the unaided works of the self-help moralist. Nor are they the performance of the ethnically

¹⁶⁹ Romans 2:6-10. See also 2 Corinthians 5:10.

¹⁷⁰ E.g. Matthew 16:27.

distinctive Jewish boundary-markers (sabbath, food-laws and circumcision). They are the things which show, rather, that one is in Christ; the things which are produced in one's life as a result of the Spirit's indwelling and operation.¹⁷¹

Justification — being declared righteous — means that, when we put our trust in Jesus, God brings forward into the present the positive judgment that he will make at the end. He finds in our favour and declares our status to be righteous — 'Not guilty' — *here and now*, in spite of our true condition, on the basis that, in response to his love, we will live a good life from now till the end of our days.

'Wait a minute,' you reply. 'I'll obviously aim to do that, but I'm far from perfect, so how can I know that his final judgment *will* in fact be positive?' There are two answers. First, the wonder of his grace impels you to live a life pleasing to God that *will* receive his approval at the end of time, even though it will doubtless fall short of perfection. And, second, he grants you the Holy Spirit, by whose power you can live God's way. All this is his gracious gift to you. What a wonderful God he is!

So 'works' do have a place in the overall picture, though *not as payment for salvation*. Interestingly, Paul himself has no problem with 'boasting' about what he has achieved and sees it as standing him in good stead on the day of judgment — because it is an effective sign that the Spirit of the living Christ has been at work in him.¹⁷²

Avoiding self-centredness

The scholars warn us that nit-picking the mechanics of all this is not helpful. That is sound advice; too much trying to get every detail clear

¹⁷¹ Lecture by N.T. Wright, *New Perspectives On Paul*, given in August 2003 at the 10th Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, Rutherford House, Edinburgh.

¹⁷² See 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 and Philippians 2:16.

leads only to confusion. Once again there's a 'mystery' element to bear in mind.

The bottom line seems to be that *God simply delights to forgive sins!* Because he is God, he can do that, without having to give reasons for it. It doesn't have to be all tied up with satisfying his righteous demands, imputing our sin to Jesus and Jesus' righteousness to us, our affronts to God's holiness, or any other technicality — issues that, historically, have been flies in the ointment of God's grace. He apparently dispenses forgiveness the way Jesus did to the paralysed man let down through the roof: he simply said to him, *without even being asked*, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven.'¹⁷³ In the same way, Paul tells us, 'God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, *not counting people's sins against them.*'¹⁷⁴ Yes, there's mystery in that, all right! But let's just enjoy it rather than try to analyse it.

Too much introspection is not helpful either. We all have a self-centred tendency to put an unwarranted emphasis on the 'me and Jesus' aspect of justification. This is at odds with Paul's consistently broader perspective. While it remains true that you are *personally* justified by faith, Paul always has in mind justification's connection to God's covenant with Abraham, by which he promised to put the *world* (not just you) right through him and his Israelite descendants. That covenant found its fulfilment in the one true Israelite, Jesus, through whom we are declared 'Not guilty'. Your personal justification is just one small part of the greater purpose of God, which concerns mending the whole of creation, not just you.

Part of that mending is the breaking down of barriers that separate one group of people from another, barriers of race, culture, gender,

¹⁷³ Luke 5:19-20.

¹⁷⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:19.

language and background. This is, as Paul sees it, a significant aspect of justification. In Galatians chapter 2, which is (chronologically) the first time justification comes up in the New Testament, it is all about people from different traditions and cultures enjoying fellowship and eating together on the grounds of nothing other than their shared faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord. This has practical implications for us today: we will be open to working across denominational, national, cultural, educational and racial boundaries with all who testify to an experience of God's justifying grace.

In summary, justification, for Paul, is God's 'Not guilty' verdict over us. It is the verdict he will declare at the final judgment, brought forward into the present. It is not primarily how one 'gets in' to God's people, but more about God's declaration that someone *is* in. You could say it is all about assurance. As Tom Wright put it, we are part of the great worldwide family of faith, to every member of which God says what he said to Jesus at his baptism: 'You are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased.' That, I trust, delights rather than wobbles you!

The NPP touches more than justification. All sorts of related issues, some minor, others major, feel its influence. Here are a few of them. You are unlikely to find them unsettling, but you need to be in the picture.

'Christ', the 'Messiah' and Israel's story

As you may know, 'Christ' is a transliteration of the Greek for 'anointed one'. And 'Messiah' is a transliteration of the Hebrew for 'anointed one'. The two thus mean the same thing.

Many believers use 'Christ' in the naïve belief that it is Jesus' surname, a bit like 'Smith'. But even those of us who know that it means 'anointed one' often fail to associate it with the rich concept of

‘Messiah’, which ties ‘Christ’ right into Israel’s history and the nation’s promised deliverer. For that reason, N.T. Wright, in particular, uses ‘Christ’ very sparingly, preferring to use ‘the Messiah’ instead, and he does this throughout his own translation of the New Testament. That way, he believes, it is easier for us to keep the New Testament revelation firmly anchored where it belongs: in the bedrock of Old Testament promise that has worked itself out in the history of Israel.

Too many Christians have lost touch completely with the Old Testament. They think that, because it is all pre-Jesus, it is unimportant. One outcome is that they *separate Israel from the church*. Their unspoken assumption is that, while God in Old Testament days dealt with the nation of Israel (Plan A), due to their failure he turned his attention to an alternative community, the church, founded by Jesus (Plan B).

This is not right at all! God has never had a ‘Plan B’. His ‘Plan A’, as we have seen, was the calling of Abraham and his descendants to be ‘a light to the Gentiles’. By this means, he would reach everyone and in due course put the whole world to rights. Paul constantly has this Old Testament narrative in mind in his writings. He insists that the fact that the Jews failed so signally in their mission did not throw God’s plan off track at all. The Messiah, Jesus, proved to be *the* true Israelite. He embodied everything that the nation had been called to be and, through him, Plan A remains on track. His resurrection vindicated him as God’s chosen one, through whom all who trust him — Gentiles as well as Jews — are justified and partake in the new age he had inaugurated.

According to Paul, Israel thus *continues* but has been *redefined*. The children of Abraham — or to use synonymous terms, ‘Israel’ or ‘the

people of God' — are now *all who believe in Jesus*, regardless of their ethnic background.¹⁷⁵ Justification breaks down the barriers. God declares all and sundry 'not guilty'. In this way God has honoured his covenant with Abraham. This is the message of Paul's letter to the Romans, whose fundamental topic is 'Who are the people of God?'

All this means, of course, that the obsession of some Christians with Zionism and the current State of Israel, in the belief that the Jews have some separate role in the purpose of God, is misplaced. If you have held Zionist sympathies, that could be a wobbler.

The gospel and politics

The NPP has also highlighted a topic we touched on earlier: that the gospel as presented in the New Testament *has political implications*.

The Greek for 'gospel', you may know, is *euangelion*. It means 'good news' and was widely used in Paul's day, long before the Christian message came on the scene, to mean the political good news that Caesar was Lord of the whole world, that the benefits of living under his rule were second to none, and that people needed to submit to him to secure those benefits. This 'good news' was always trumpeted on the emperor's birthday.

Christians took over the word and associated it with the risen Jesus. It was he, and not Caesar, they proclaimed, who was Lord of the whole world, and real life and success came from submission to him. Every knee must bow before Christ, not Caesar, especially a Caesar who claimed to be a god.

Seen this way, the Christian message was more than a private affair concerned with how an individual may find God. It had a public dimension, in that it boldly confronted the claims of Rome — and the

¹⁷⁵ Romans 4:16; Galatians 3:7

church that did so thus came to be seen as a politically subversive movement, threatening the very foundations of the Empire. This explains why many Christians were willing to die rather than sacrifice to the Emperor as a deity and say, ‘Caesar is Lord’.

The gospel has political implications today, too. I don’t mean that God lines up with socialists and not conservatives, or vice versa. He will never side with any political party. I do mean, though, that *Christians can’t help getting involved with influencing and improving society* — and that is a political activity. In nations where the state believes that this is its own prerogative, to be a Christian is to be considered subversive and dangerous. It invites persecution.

Let’s be clear about this. In the New Testament the ‘gospel’ is not primarily a system of *personal* salvation, nor even the good news that there *is* a way of salvation — though that is, of course, implied. It is fundamentally the proclamation that Jesus of Nazareth has been raised from the dead and has thereby been shown to be Israel’s promised Messiah. And since God’s purpose through the Messiah has always been to reach *every* nation, and to put the *whole world* to rights, the claim to be Israel’s Messiah is simultaneously a claim to be the whole world’s true Lord. Paul’s ‘gospel’ was *‘Jesus Christ is Lord’*. It’s a kingdom thing!

The gospel is thus a call to submission, obedience and allegiance to Jesus, and that finds expression in *faith* in him — what Paul calls ‘the obedience of faith’,¹⁷⁶ expressed in baptism. Those who in this way become his people have *a mandate to bring things into line with God’s will wherever they go*. They mend, heal, affirm, comfort, restore and help. They make the world a better place. Some governments don’t like that kind of ‘interference’ in their programmes. They don’t mind

¹⁷⁶ Romans 1:5.

‘closet Christians’ but fear those who come out of the closet to make a difference to society.

Are you up to taking the risk? If a ‘me and Jesus’ focus has made you shy away from too much contact with ‘the world’, this issue could be a major wobbler because it will require a complete refocusing of your Christian purpose. It could re-invigorate your whole life!

Righteousness

Now let’s return to the word ‘righteous’ in its various forms, because the NPP has shone some new light on that, too.

The Greek term translated ‘righteousness’ (*dikaiosynē*) has been over-simplified, the scholars assure us. Its meaning is in fact variable and determined by its context. Unfortunately, many English translations of the New Testament, traditionally leaning on the Reformers’ sixteenth-century interpretation, do little to dispel the confusion. Let’s look at a few common New Testament phrases that include this word.

And yes, this too is a bit technical. But you’re used to that by now, so here we go.

‘The righteousness of God’

The phrase ‘the righteousness of God’ occurs in, for example, Romans 3:21, which in the NIV says, ‘But now apart from the law *the righteousness of God* has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.’

This Greek phrase always means God’s *own* righteousness. In the verse just quoted, that comes through clearly enough. But in many other instances of the phrase virtually every English Bible renders it not as God’s *own* righteousness but as the status that *God’s people* have *from* him. That there is such a status is not in question; it is our ‘justified’ status and we enjoy it as a gift from God. But this phrase is

not a description of it. What, then, does ‘the righteousness of God’ describe?

God’s ‘righteousness’ means *his integrity in maintaining his faithful commitment to his covenant with Abraham* — to ‘Plan A’.

In spite of Israel’s waywardness and resulting exile, God remained faithful to his covenant and has rescued her as he promised he would — through Christ. He has ‘done the *right* thing’ by her. And he will pursue that covenant plan to its fulfilment in eventually liberating the whole creation from corruption, sin and death. He has proved to be *righteous* in this: he has been straight; he can be trusted; and he will see it through.

Contrary to Reformed views, then, God’s righteousness is *not* synonymous with his salvation. It is not his, or Christ’s, righteousness imputed to us; it is the *reason why* God has saved his people. We are saved because God has proved righteous in honouring his commitment to the Abrahamic covenant.

This is important, because there is a view among Calvinists, and others of the Reformed persuasion, that the interpretation given by sixteenth-century Reformers, like Luther and Calvin, to certain passages of Scripture must be true for all time. That is not right. They were men of their era, and they looked at Scripture through the spectacles provided by their historical situation. That situation was one of strong reaction to the corrupt Roman Catholicism of the time. While that led them to rediscover some permanently relevant truths in the New Testament, they also came to certain conclusions that more recent study has shown to be questionable. This is one of them. Don’t let it throw you, because it changes nothing in your walk with the Lord.

'The righteousness that comes from God'

In the phrase 'the righteousness that comes from God' the Greek wording is different, just as the English is. It occurs in, for example, Philippians 3:8-9, which in the NIV says, '...that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — *the righteousness that comes from God* on the basis of faith.'

The NIV has it right: the phrase means 'the righteousness that comes *from* God' (as distinct from the righteousness that characterises God himself). It is this phrase that indicates the righteous *status* that we, as 'justified' believers, enjoy as a gift from him. As we have seen, however, this does not mean that the righteousness of God or of Christ is itself somehow transferred (imputed) to us, as traditional Protestantism has affirmed since the Reformation.

'Righteous' or 'Just' or 'Justified'

The Greek adjective behind 'righteous', 'just' and 'justified' is *dikaios*. It takes us back to the Jewish law court that we visited earlier, where a judge settled a case by pronouncing '*dikaios*' ('Not guilty') over either the plaintiff or the defendant. It didn't mean that the person was '*made* righteous'. It meant he was '*declared* righteous' as a legal *status*; he was judged to be 'in the clear'. A good English alternative would be 'vindicated'. And that's how, as believers, we stand with God.¹⁷⁷

This status is what, in Paul's writings, is 'reckoned' to the believer.¹⁷⁸ But it is not God's or Christ's own righteousness that is somehow transferred. It is a new *status*: the believer now enjoys the status of 'justified sinner' and, by implication, 'covenant member' of

¹⁷⁷ It has nothing at all to do with the 'righteousness' of the judge being somehow transferred to that person.

¹⁷⁸ E.g. Romans 5:14-21.

God's people. It is accredited to those who are in Christ, that is, those who, having heard the gospel, respond with 'the obedience of faith'. They become *bona fide* members of 'the Israel of God'.

All this represents a shift of emphasis that is hard for some to come to terms with, because we have become so used to using the term 'justified' in a certain way — a way that the NPP has shown to be open to question. But it need not trouble you, because your happy condition as a child of God is not threatened by it!

'Works of the law'

Here's a phrase — 'works of the law' — that you will recognise from reading Romans.

The Reformers equated Paul's phrase with the kind of religion they saw in the Roman Catholic Church of their day. Subsequent generations of Protestants have maintained that view, unable to imagine that the phrase could mean anything different. They hold that it was — and continues to be — just a later historical application of the principle by which Paul chastised the Jews for *trying to earn their way into God's favour by their good works*. Thus, when he says, in Romans 10:3, that they 'sought to establish their own' righteousness he means that they were desperately trying to accumulate spiritual merit by their own moral efforts and so get into God's good books.

The NPP, however, detaching itself from the sixteenth-century mentality and examining the mindset of Second Temple Judaism (the Judaism of Paul's day), sees the 'works of the law' as something different. Its proponents maintain that the Jews in Paul's day never, in fact, saw God's favour as something they could earn by their good works. They universally recognised that God's choice of them as a people was an act of his grace alone. If this was the case, what did

Paul mean when he said they ‘sought to establish their own’ righteousness?

Wright describes how he thought it through: ‘Supposing, I thought, Paul meant “seeking to establish *their own* righteousness”, not in the sense of a *moral* status based on the *performance* of Torah and the consequent accumulation of a treasury of merit, but an *ethnic* status based on the *possession* of Torah as the sign of automatic covenant membership?’ On this view, “works of the law” are the works through which the Jew was defined over against the pagan: his pride was in the ‘badges’ of covenant membership like the Mosaic Law and circumcision.¹⁷⁹

Paul, according to the NPP, is showing in Romans that reliance on these ‘Jewish badges’ is no guarantee of covenant membership. On the contrary, he insists, the Jews have for the most part shown themselves to be ungodly. Worst of all, they have rejected God’s revelation of Jesus, their Messiah, and have failed to put their faith in him, while many Gentiles, who never had the Jews’ ancient privileges, have been flocking to him and God has accepted them. Israel has been redefined. Membership of the covenant community is by faith in the Messiah alone, just as it was for its founding father, Abraham, who believed God and found acceptance long before the law was given or circumcision introduced.

In summary, reliance on the possession of Torah, circumcision and observing the food laws were the Jews’ vaunted ‘works of the law’, while Paul was at pains to show that the only ‘badge of membership’ that now counted was faith in Jesus.

If this is the case, you may have to play down your traditional emphasis on warning ‘unbelievers’ today that they can’t earn God’s

¹⁷⁹ Romans 2:27.

love and forgiveness by their ‘good works’. They can’t, of course; they need to trust God for a ‘not guilty’ verdict through faith in Christ. But any ‘good works’ they do are surely far better than overtly ‘bad works’ and, if Cornelius is anything to go by, we can be sure that God looks on them with approval.¹⁸⁰

‘Faith’ and ‘Faithfulness’

Stick with me — we’re nearly through with Pauline phrases.

The NPP scholars who shone new light on the use of ‘just’ and ‘righteous’ in Paul’s writings have done something similar with the Greek word *pistis*, normally translated ‘faith’, along with related words like *pisteuō*, ‘to have faith’ or ‘to believe’.

Traditionally, Protestants have held that Paul always used *pistis* to mean *trust in Christ for salvation*, as in ‘By grace you have been saved, through *faith*.’¹⁸¹ That is often the case. But recent studies into the word and its background have concluded that in some instances it means *faithfulness*, in the sense of firm commitment in an interpersonal relationship.¹⁸²

Sometimes, especially in an unequal relationship like that of a slave to his master, *pistis* in its ‘faithfulness’ sense is a near-equivalent of ‘obedience’. This means that, whereas Protestants have traditionally seen ‘faith’ and ‘obedience’ as distinct from one another, and even incompatible, the two are in fact closely related. That helps to explain the phrase ‘the obedience of faith’.¹⁸³ Indeed, ‘faith’ with this

¹⁸⁰ Read Acts 10 carefully, noting especially verses 2-4, 15, 30-31, and 34-35. Cornelius was a good man, but not a Christian. Yet he clearly had God’s approval.

¹⁸¹ Ephesians 2:8.

¹⁸² Sometimes this is so obvious that most English versions do render it ‘faithfulness’. For example, *pistis* is commonly translated that way in Romans 3:3.

¹⁸³ Romans 1:5 ESV

connotation, far from ruling out any human effort, positively encourages it. While in no way undermining the traditionally emphasised need for faith (in the sense of taking God at his word) for salvation, this view equally emphasises the fact that *true faith will always issue in the kind of legitimate works implied in the New Testament's 'make every effort to...' passages.*¹⁸⁴

One Greek phrase that includes this word has received particular attention in the NPP: *pistis Christou*, literally 'the faith[fulness] of Christ'.

Until recently, most English versions of the Bible assumed it to mean the 'faith *in* Christ' that people exercise, and have translated it that way in passages like Romans 3:22; Galatians 2:16 and Philippians 3:9. But the weight of scholarship has now swung behind the conviction that Paul means by it 'the *faithfulness* of Christ'. What that describes is the *faithfulness of the Messiah* to the purposes of God — particularly in seeing it through to death on the cross. Viewing it this way, Jesus is the true Israelite who succeeded in living God's way when all the others failed, enabling God to remain true to his covenant.¹⁸⁵ And for that we are eternally grateful!

The NPP: conclusions

That, you will be glad to know, concludes our rather technical examination of some key Pauline phrases. The New Perspective on

¹⁸⁴ Romans 14:19; Ephesians 4:3; Hebrews 4:11; 12:14; 2 Peter 1:5, 10; 3:14.

¹⁸⁵ Some Bible versions do translate the phrase the way the NPP believes is right. For example, the International Standard Version (ISV) of Romans 3:22 says, '...God's righteousness through the *faithfulness* of Jesus the Messiah...' The NET Bible is similar, and the popular NIV, in its 2011 edition, gives the alternative in a footnote.

Paul touches other areas, but we have looked at the main ones. What do you make of them overall?

If we take N.T. Wright as the best-known current exponent of some of these approaches we have every reason to be confident that we are on safe ground. Wright has shown himself time and again to be committed to the fundamentals of evangelical faith, and the tweaking of some of these, represented by the above points, in no way undermines that position. Another spokesman, James Dunn, is also broadly evangelical and contributed the two volumes on Romans in the well-respected *Word Biblical Commentary* series.

Some Calvinist teachers and writers have overreacted to the NPP — unhelpfully and prematurely, in my opinion. If you have stuck rigidly to a doctrinal system all your life, you are prone to see any challenge to it as a threat to your very *raison d'être* and to become unnecessarily defensive. One of the strong points of the Reformers, however, was their commitment to bring to Scripture an open-minded approach, over against the fixed traditional view, and to go where their findings took them — the principle of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone). This is the very attitude that the likes of Wright have adopted.

In looking freshly at Paul's writings in the light of newly available insights into Greek, and fresh background information about his era, these scholars have taken a further step towards understanding his meaning, and we have nothing to fear from it. It will take some time for English translations of the New Testament to catch up and tweak some words and phrases. Until they do, the traditional renderings of phrases like *pistis Christou* will probably continue to shape readers' views.

If you have stuck with me so far you have probably developed a bit of toughness in the face of the challenges to evangelical faith that we

have been examining. The NPP's challenges could seem quite minor compared with others. I hope, however, that you may have gone a bit further than that, to the point where the new thinking is blowing through your spiritual sensitivities like a breath of fresh air, clearing out the cobwebs and giving you a new level of excitement about the gospel and God's great salvation.

Now let's move on to consider who benefits from that gospel. Is it every human being? Is it many? Or is it just those with a personal relationship with Jesus?

17 - The Wider Hope — and Beyond

Traditionally, Christianity has a track record of distinguishing ‘us’ from ‘them’, insiders from outsiders.

Most would say this is inevitable. When Christians proclaim their message, it always meets with a mixed reception. Some reject it, preferring to go their own way, while others (usually only a few) accept it and thus change from outsider to insider. This seems to fit well with insider/outsider categories in Scripture itself. We have wheat and weeds, sheep and goats. We have Paul saying, ‘You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord’; and again, ‘He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves.’¹⁸⁶ We have saints and sinners, the baptised and the unbaptised. It all seems pretty clear.

There are some worrying aspects to it, however. One is that Christians can sometimes look down on ‘outsiders’ in a way that is anything but helpful. While most don’t intend to convey a ‘holier than thou’ impression, they often do. They classify outsiders as ‘sinners’, and sometimes make this clear to them as part of their ‘evangelism’. A second worry is the unspoken assumption that the great majority of outsiders will probably remain outsiders — in other words, that true believers will always be a minority of humanity, because only a few believe the gospel. If you have the traditional view of hell, that is a major problem.

The fate of the unevangelised

Christians need to face up to such issues openly, but most don’t. They prefer to avoid the question about the status in God’s eyes, first, of the

¹⁸⁶ Ephesians 5:8; Colossians 1:13.

millions who never heard of Jesus, or the gospel, because they lived in the millennia *before* him. It's easy to say, 'Well, the Bible doesn't say anything about that, so we just have to leave them in God's hands.' But deep down we know this is not very satisfactory and is really dodging the issue.

Then there are the other millions: those who have lived *after* Christ but who, through no fault of their own, have not heard of him or the gospel. They happened to be born into a Hindu culture in India, or into an animist one in the Amazon jungle. Are they all to be consigned to hell, as most brands of hard-line Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, have traditionally affirmed? What about you? What do *you* think is their destiny?

Many who have dared to face such questions have not only come up with some variations on hell — as we have seen — but also some alternatives to it, and these are being widely propagated today. You need to be aware of them for two reasons. First, you are likely to be pressed by some supporters to accept one of them, so you should be prepared. And, second, you might wish to embrace one of them yourself.

Universalism

Let's start with the alternative called *universalism*. This is the belief that in the end everybody will be saved, that every single human being who has ever lived will be part of God's glorious new world in the age to come. If hell exists in the form in which it is traditionally described — which most universalists doubt — nobody will end up in it, at least not permanently, because God will see to it that they are granted eternal bliss.

Let's be honest, this is a very attractive prospect, and one that has had a good number of supporters down the centuries. But today, most

Christians who claim to accord the Bible the primary say in such matters generally reject universalism pretty quickly. They do so on the grounds that, as they see it, Scripture seems to envisage some departing this life without faith in Christ. But as we have noted, many are now taking a much more flexible view of the Bible and are sceptical about any claim as to ‘what the Bible *teaches*’.

Insofar as universalists do lean on the Bible, they can find plenty of material to support their conviction that what God has done in Christ has ramifications that touch the many rather than the few, and may indeed extend to all.

They point, for example, to Paul’s analogy between the original Adam and Christ, the ‘last Adam’. He writes, ‘As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.’¹⁸⁷ Is it likely, they ask, that ‘all’ in the first case means all, but that ‘all’ in the second case means just a few? Their opponents reply that, because of universal sinfulness, the ‘all’ who are ‘in Adam’ really means all, whereas the others are ‘in Christ’ only by faith, and since not all exercise such faith, the ‘all’ who are in Christ are not co-extensive with the first group.

‘Ah yes, OK,’ say the universalists, ‘but what about those Bible verses that talk about the universal effects of Christ’s work?’ And they quote, ‘God was reconciling *the world* to himself in Christ’ and ‘God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us *all*.’ They point out that Jesus is ‘the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of *the world*’ and who said, ‘I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all people* to myself.’ And many more.¹⁸⁸ Opponents, of course, can come up with a string of different verses that appear to limit the scope of

¹⁸⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:22.

¹⁸⁸ The main passages quoted in this connection are John 12:32; 2 Corinthians 5:14, 18-19; Colossians 1:19-20; 1 Timothy 2:3-6; 4:9-10; Hebrews 2:9; 1 John 2:2, 4:14; John 1:29; 3:17; Romans 8:32; and Titus 2:11.

Christ's atoning work.¹⁸⁹ And this brings us back to the problem we identified early on: that the Bible does not speak with one, clear voice on many subjects. Certainly, on this one it is not as clear as many make out. In that case, which verses trump which others? How can you reach a satisfactory answer to the question, 'Does the Bible teach universalism?'

Those who maintain it does are of different kinds. Typical of the scholarly end of the spectrum is *The Evangelical Universalist* by Gregory MacDonald, with its subtitle 'The biblical hope that God's love will save us all'. There are two things to note in the title alone. One is the inclusion of the word 'evangelical', which is a way of assuring us that, in the writer's opinion, universalism and evangelicalism are compatible. The other is the word 'biblical', telling us that, in the author's view at least, there is a case for basing universalism on the Bible.

At the other end of the spectrum is *Love Wins* by Rob Bell, with its subtitle 'A book about heaven, hell and the fate of every person who ever lived'. Bell is an able communicator with a punchy, almost tabloid-newspaper writing style. He faces the deep questions about God, faith and the gospel with a disarming directness that has made him many friends, and as many enemies.

One key question he raises is the common evangelical notion that only during this life do we get to choose whether or not to trust in Jesus. Death is the cut-off point; after that your fate is sealed. Personally, I've never been able to find any clear biblical warrant for such a view, and I'm glad that Bell throws it open for debate. He

¹⁸⁹ Such as 'Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up for her' (Ephesians 5:25). But that doesn't necessarily imply that he died *only* for the church. We could quote Paul, who said, 'The Son of God...loved *me* and gave himself for *me*' (Galatians 2:20) but wouldn't deduce from that that it was for Paul alone that Jesus died.

points out that, down the centuries, many Christians have believed in post-mortem opportunities to turn to God. If we allow this, in theory at least, then universalism could become a reality. Especially so if hell is restorative — an experience of alienation from God so awful that even the most hardened sinner will, from within it, reach out to God for forgiveness and reconciliation. This very concept might be a serious block-poker for you, but the least you can do is give it consideration.

Another key word in the subtitle of Gregory MacDonald's book is 'hope': 'the biblical *hope* that God's love will save us all'. This alerts us to a particular slant on universalism. In general, evangelicals have taken 'universalism' to mean that all will certainly be saved in the end, because *God will see to it* that they are. But how does that mesh with the 'control versus love' issue we looked at earlier? If 'control' is God's primary attribute, then he can do as he wishes and none can stand in his way. If he decides that he will save everybody, it will happen. But, as we saw, the weight of opinion at present is that love is his primary attribute. And if love is uncontrolling, then God *cannot* unilaterally bring everybody to his side forever. He can only continue to show them his love, and hope that its inherent drawing-power will cause them, of their own accord, to forsake their selfish independence at some point and draw near to him.

Many now believe that this is what will happen. They refuse to believe, of course, that death is the cut-off point. Whatever may happen immediately after death to those who have either been ignorant of Jesus or have consciously rejected him, they will still be able to respond to God's love.

This opportunity will continue, they affirm, even after what is traditionally called the 'final judgment' described in Scripture, and which Christians have generally believed will take place at Christ's

return.¹⁹⁰ Current thinking tends to hold that those who, as a result of that judgment, end up in hell will be there, not because of some verdict pronounced by God, but because it is the destination to which their sin and self-centredness will have inevitably brought them. Even there, however, they remain within the reach of God's love.

The last two chapters of the Bible portray the Holy City, the community of the blessed, who enjoy eternal fellowship with God and the Lamb. Through it flows the river of life. And the city's gates stand open, suggesting that there is still opportunity for those outside to enter. And the invitation is still going out: 'Let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.'¹⁹¹

On this basis, say the proponents of this brand of universalism, we have hope that those suffering the metaphorical heat and barrenness of their opted-for distance from God will feel thirsty and change their minds. They will, of their own choice, venture out towards the city in response to God's loving invitation. There, like the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, God will meet them and enfold them in his embrace. We can never confidently say that *all* will eventually respond this way, but it is a realistic hope that can cheer our hearts.

What are your reactions to that prospect? I, for one, find it wonderfully appealing.

The 'wider hope'

Not everyone, however, is comfortable with universalism, in either of its main forms. Some think it goes too far. For them, there are alternatives that find a middle ground between it and traditional evangelical exclusivism (heaven only if you believe in Jesus, hell if

¹⁹⁰ The clearest exponent of this view is David Bentley Hart in his book *That All Shall Be Saved* (Yale University Press, 2019)

¹⁹¹ Revelation 22:17

you don't). These alternatives make much of the Bible passages that speak of Christ's atoning work affecting everybody, but recognise that God, because he will not coerce, still allows people to turn their backs on it. And some, they believe, might persist in doing so forever.

What about people of other religions? In this connection, many Christians use the phrase 'the wider hope'. This is the view that God, being as great as he is, cannot be limited to revealing himself narrowly through the Christian religion. He is well able to make himself, and his love, known more widely through direct revelation, including in visions and dreams, as is commonly being reported among Muslims, in particular, in our own day. He can do this for atheists, agnostics and people of other religions or no religion.

The adherents of this view believe he does so, both powerfully and frequently. Sure, a full understanding of who Jesus is, gained through the gospel, can bring new dimensions of appreciation to recipients of such revelation. But even if they never get a chance to gain such an understanding, their experience of God and his love remains valid and will see them saved in the end.

This is different, however, from saying that all religions lead to God. Christians in general deny this, pointing out that other religions may in fact be vehicles for spiritual deception. But to put a more positive spin on it, the very existence of other religions reflects the universal craving for spiritual meaning and satisfaction. God, the 'wider hope' adherents say, responds to that craving without necessarily endorsing the religions within which it happens. If he could condescend to have dealings with ancient Israel in spite of their warlike and bloodthirsty ways, he can perhaps have dealings with religious devotees today with an equally skewed perception of who he is.

This general approach is certainly more humane than exclusivism. It offers real hope that those who, through no fault of their own, never hear the gospel remain, nevertheless, within the reach of God's love and saving power.

Trinitarian theology

One strand of teaching along these lines has come to be called 'Trinitarian theology' — an unhelpful label since all Christians would consider themselves Trinitarian in that they believe God to be one God in three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But, leaving the label issue to one side, it emphasises that God, as Father, loves all his creatures unconditionally, and in Jesus has *reconciled them all* to himself. Its proponents may not be comfortable with 'universalism', but they are very happy to affirm 'universal reconciliation'.

Just as the Trinity is relational, with Father, Son and Holy Spirit in constant, loving relationship with each other, so they have chosen to embrace within that relationship the whole of humanity, regardless of whether individuals come to faith or not. This view holds, not that there is no difference between Christians and non-Christians but that, because of Jesus and what he has done, *all* humans — believers and non-believers — are united to God, all are adopted as his children, all are within the Trinitarian embrace. It's just that some know it, and some don't.

This view, they are keen to show, is not some modern novelty. They trace it in the writings of fathers of the church like Irenaeus and Athanasius, and in every generation since, with modern support in theologian Karl Barth and the brothers Thomas and James Torrance.

Fundamentally, it teaches that the incarnation marked a new beginning in God for the whole of the human race, not just for a few believers. Like universalism, it leans on the New Testament's 'for all'

passages, like ‘He [Jesus] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also *for the sins of the whole world*,¹⁹² and on the Adam/Christ analogy in which their actions affect the whole of humanity, including those who lived before Jesus came. All are thus ‘in Christ’ and, as such, are reconciled to the Father, who loves them, are ‘accepted in the Beloved’ and are freely forgiven.

This status is not, therefore, merely a *potential* reality that becomes true for us only if we believe; it is an *accomplished* reality, one that we are urged to accept. But even if we don’t, it is still true. Here, then, is an approach quite different from the traditional one, in which such a status becomes a reality only when we actively and consciously put our trust in Jesus. According to the Trinitarians, he is a loving Father to all and a frowning Judge to none.

This ‘Judge versus Father’ issue is, in fact, one of the difficulties of the traditional view: our actions, it seems, have the power to change God. As long as we keep him at arm’s length, he is an angry Judge bent on destroying us for our sins. But once we believe in Jesus he switches and becomes our loving Father.

And there’s a second difficulty with it: its tendency to divide the Trinity, so that a friendly, self-sacrificing Jesus steps in to rescue us from the clutches of a wrathful God. ‘Trinitarian theology’ deals nicely with both difficulties. Maybe you believed the Trinitarian line anyway. Or these ideas may be another case of tower-wobbling for you. But you will have to acknowledge that they do seem to have a substantial scriptural underpinning. And, once again, this has always been the position of the Eastern church.

Accepting Trinitarian theology will affect the gospel message you proclaim because, on this view:

¹⁹² 1 John 2:2.

‘Although all people are already *objectively* redeemed by Jesus Christ, not all have yet personally and *subjectively* awakened to and accepted what God has done for them. They do not yet know who they truly are in union with Jesus.’¹⁹³

Your evangelism will aim, therefore, to get them to repent and believe not *so that* spiritual realities will be changed, but to do so as God’s appointed way of accepting what are *already* spiritual realities. It’s a major difference. It also dilutes the ‘us and them’ distinction, in that we will no longer view non-believers as ‘outsiders’ or ‘the opposition’, but as children of God whose need is just to discover how much their Father loves them. That could lead to a softer manner often painfully lacking in some forms of so-called evangelism.

Trinitarian theology is one of the schools of thought holding that opportunities to respond to God’s love are not limited to this life. It holds that the final judgment will provide one more chance for even lifelong rejecters to change their mind. But it stops short of confident universalism. It certainly *hopes*, as God himself does,¹⁹⁴ that all will choose in due course to accept his love, but stresses that we can’t profess to know whether that will in fact happen or not.

Theology of The Shack

What we have been describing is the theology popularised in William Young’s 2007 novel, *The Shack*, which caused a big stir when first published. By putting deep theological reflection into the context of a real-life situation (a Christian couple whose young daughter gets abducted, sexually abused and then murdered), it enabled many who

¹⁹³ *The God Revealed In Jesus Christ* (Grace Communion International 2010, p11).

¹⁹⁴ 2 Peter 3:9.

would never have tackled ‘neat’ theology to access some heart-warming truths of Scripture.

More recently a friend of Young’s, Baxter Kruger, has filled out some of the theological detail implied in the novel, and many find the general position represented by his work to be an attractive middle ground between inclusive universalism and exclusive Calvinism. It weakens the ‘us and them’ mentality without dispensing with it altogether. But many Christian writers are today urging us to dispense with that distinction completely. They remind us of Jesus’ warnings not to be judgmental, and point out that when Scripture declares that ‘the Lord knows those who are his’,¹⁹⁵ it implies that we don’t.

The call to ease off on ‘us and them’ distinctions shouldn’t be a wobbler for any of us. But if we are tempted to look down on non-Christians as ‘them’, we have to concede that universalism solves the problem by insisting that there is no ‘them’, only ‘us’. Trinitarian theology doesn’t go quite as far, but does go a fair way along that road.

Having said all this, that there is a *valid* ‘us and them’ distinction is, I think, pretty clear. God’s call, quoted by Paul, to ‘come out from them and be separate’ is unmistakable.¹⁹⁶ And the NT writers make no apology for talking about ‘outsiders’ or ‘those outside the church’, whom they contrast with ‘those inside’.¹⁹⁷ Once we have been overwhelmed by God’s grace and love we can never be at home in quite the same way with people who, for one reason or another, remain unmoved by that grace and love. Like the early church, we find ourselves ‘together’ and ‘of one mind’ with those who love the

¹⁹⁵ 2 Timothy 2:19.

¹⁹⁶ See 2 Corinthians 6:14-18.

¹⁹⁷ See 1 Corinthians 5:12-13. Also 1 Thessalonians 4:12; Colossians 4:5; 1 Timothy 3:7 and 1 Peter 2:12.

Lord, and no matter how hard we try, we can't be quite as comfortable with those who don't share that spiritual bond.

Isn't the 'us' bit, in fact, what 'church' is all about? If church is indeed 'the redeemed community' of popular definition,¹⁹⁸ it follows that some are outside of that community, giving an 'us and them' situation. As Christians we are separate whether we like it or not. Otherwise, 'church' — a major element in the New Testament — means nothing.

Separation for a purpose

The important thing, I think, is to understand the nature and purpose of our being 'separate'. It is not so that we can bask in a sense of spiritual superiority and look down our noses at those outside who, unlike us, are wretched sinners. Nor is it so that we can, Pharisee-like, avoid defilement through contact with sinners by creating a spiritual ghetto where we rub shoulders with 'the world' as little as possible. That is surely not what 'church' is about at all.

Jesus himself adopted neither of these attitudes. In fact, he seemed to delight in hob-nobbing with the riff-raff of society, who were equally delighted to have him among them. We should be the same. He didn't take part in their dubious activities, and neither should we, but he mixed with them, loved them, affirmed them and forgave them. He lifted them up. And he was able to do that because, in the right sense, he was 'separate' from them. His closeness to the Father and his embracing of Father's values set him apart, but that in itself was part of the attraction. The folk he mixed with had been yearning

¹⁹⁸ Or, if you believe that all have in fact been redeemed, the community of those with an *awareness* of their redeemed status.

for a better life, for something different and more wholesome — and in Jesus they found it.

As I write I am looking at the lamp on my desk. It connects to the socket on the wall by an insulated cable. The purpose of the insulation is to stop the electricity from being dissipated into whatever it might touch between the socket and the lamp. It keeps it inside the cable so that it can pack a punch where it matters: at the light-bulb. This, I suggest, is to be the nature of our separation, as Christians, from ‘outsiders’: we are to keep ourselves pure and live manifestly godly lives so that, when we touch the lives of non-believers, we can pack a spiritual punch. Not in that dreadful ‘holier than thou’ manner which is such a turn-off, but by the enjoying of a vibrant relationship with the Lord in the power of the Spirit that makes Jesus seem irresistibly attractive to everyone we meet. And ‘church’ should be the corporate expression of that.

Attitudes to those of other religions

Part of our attractiveness will be our refusal to be judgmental. Pushing ‘us and them’ thinking to the back of our minds, we will love people as they are, the way Jesus did, regardless of their behaviour, their background, their bigotry or their religion.

Our success (or otherwise) in this will be put to the test when we encounter people of other religions, like active Buddhists, Muslims or Hindus — or western New Age devotees. We can sometimes feel a sneer coming on right away, because we think their religion is, at best, a deception and, at worst, a whirlpool of demonic activity. Only Christianity is true, we affirm. So, we work hard to distinguish between the person and that person’s religion, reaching out to the one while rejecting the other. But that’s not as easy in practice as it is in theory. The person will quickly pick up the vibe that you reject their

religion, and will construe it as a rejection of them, even though that's the last thing you want to convey.

So maybe you shouldn't despise their religion in the first place but try to be more ambivalent about it. Maybe you should be glad they have any degree of spiritual awareness at all, even though you would prefer to see it channelled in a Jesus direction. This is the view taken by some of the more extreme questioners of traditional Christian values. They would go as far as saying we should not try to convert, say, a Muslim to Christianity but encourage them to find God within the boundaries of their own religion. For many evangelicals that certainly is a wobbler, and many would reject it as going too far.

The meaning of 'Christian'

A related area where evangelicals are prone to be judgmental is in their traditionally narrow concept of what it means to 'be a Christian'.

Many I have met would seriously question, for instance, whether it is possible to be a Roman Catholic and still be a 'proper Christian'! Some would even have misgivings about Anglicans. Methodists, they reckon, are a bit dodgy because a lot of them are liberals. Baptists are probably OK, as are Pentecostals and the charismatics of the 'new churches', despite their weirdness. It's all very subjective.

Among evangelicals at large, the main badge of approval seems to be that you have 'accepted Jesus as your Saviour', 'asked Jesus into your heart', prayed the 'sinner's prayer' or responded to an appeal where you get 'prayed for'. If you don't match this criterion, you are 'not one of us'. Little wonder that Christians with such a mentality seem so unattractive. People out there can hardly be blamed for thinking, 'If being one of them means having such narrow and superior attitudes, I'll give it a miss.'

The challenge for evangelicals, then, is to develop a more accepting and welcoming attitude to people in general, and to concede that God's criteria for acceptance are undoubtedly a good deal broader than the common evangelical ones. Remember Cornelius. Maybe some of the options outlined in this chapter will help you in the right direction.

I'm aware that this suggestion may be a wobbler for some who have been reared on a narrow Christian exclusivism, but that's one block in the tower that I'm glad to give a good poke!

18 - A Bridge Too Far?

We have covered a wide range of challenges to traditional evangelicalism. If you have stuck with me so far, the chances are that you are over the hump and have found enough spiritual robustness to handle them without being completely thrown off course. Well done!

It's a fact of life, however, that once you let go of a position, the pendulum can too easily swing to the opposite extreme. That seems to have happened in this case, at least for some, who would now characterise themselves as ex-evangelicals. Having permitted certain new ideas to get a foot in the door, they have allowed them to kick the door wide open and barge through with all manner of way-out notions in tow. Many have consciously dropped any claim to be evangelicals, preferring to call themselves 'progressive Christians' or 'post-evangelicals'.

This has not turned them into monsters. Most of the people I know in this category remain as gracious, Christ-loving and kind as anyone could be, but in their views on the topics we have looked at they are, in practice, liberals who feel no obligation to give Scripture much weight at all in forming their conclusions. They would admit this openly, and feel no need to excuse their position. They would argue that the kind of issues we have touched on above throw into question how far we can rely on the Bible as a meaningful guide anyway, and that they are taking that to its logical conclusion.

I personally feel this is a mistake. Logic can be overrated. We can accept a modified view of the Bible while continuing to respect it as God's Word and believe that it provides *a broad yet sound platform on which to build one's theology and one's life*. That's certainly where I stand

myself, but you are going to have to face up to this and decide for yourself where you will end up on the spectrum.

Let me give you an example of some different positions. We have referred several times to New Testament scholar Tom (N.T.) Wright. He has been responsible for some of the new ideas circulating today, particularly in respect of 'justification' and what it means. He has also been a strong challenger of the 'go to heaven when you die' scenario, reminding us that the great biblical hope is the new heaven and new earth to be inaugurated at Jesus' return. He's not afraid to do a bit of block-poking.

Wright co-authored a book with another New Testament scholar, the late Marcus Borg, entitled *The Meaning Of Jesus*. In it, the two of them, coming from different perspectives, present their understanding of certain aspects of Jesus' life and mission. Wright is solid on the fundamentals of the Christian faith. He believes, for instance, in the virgin birth of Jesus, his awareness of his messianic calling, his bodily resurrection, and his future return to consummate the kingdom. Borg, by contrast, seems to me to have thrown out the baby with the bathwater. Here are some of Borg's stated convictions:

- The changing of water to wine at Cana did not really happen; like many of the miracles, it is 'history metaphorized'.
- Before the Easter events Jesus did not see himself as the promised Messiah.
- 'I do not accept a supernatural interventionist model of God and God's relation to the world.'
- 'I see the use [in the NT] of passages from the Hebrew Bible generally as prophecy historicized rather than as prediction fulfilled.'

- The virgin birth did not in fact take place, and neither did Jesus' bodily resurrection.
- The incident on the road to Emmaus, where Jesus allegedly revealed himself to two disciples, did not really happen.
- Jesus did not see his own death as a sacrifice for sin.
- Jesus said none of the 'I am' statements attributed to him in the Gospels.
- 'I can say the creed without misgivings [but] I do not see it as a set of literally true doctrinal statements.'
- 'I do not myself think there will be a future visible return of Christ.'

It is fair to say, I think, that with such a degree of doubt and scepticism, there is nothing of substance left to hold onto. Everything is left vague and airy-fairy.

Maybe the minds and personal wiring of intelligent people like Marcus Borg enable them to live on such a flimsy diet, but the great majority of ordinary folk can't do it. We need something meatier and more substantial, something with a flavour of real historical events. We need a Jesus who has his feet on the ground as well as his head in the air. Happily, the block-poking writers whose conclusions I have been outlining in this book are of the same mind, being content to be seen as authentically evangelical in their approach to the Christian faith in general, and the Bible in particular. With them, you and I are in good company.

Converting people to Christianity

Borg is not the only one I perceive as having maybe gone too far down the road of scepticism towards the Christian basics. I will mention two others. One is Brian McLaren, an able communicator whose writings continue to influence many. Most of what he says is

good, and in line with some of the topics we have looked at. But he tends then to push the boundaries even further, ending up — at least as I perceive it — in a degree of vagueness not unlike that of Borg, even though he seems more rooted in traditional Christian faith than him, with a deeper respect for the Bible and its broad teaching.

Here's an example of what I mean: the question of Christianity and other religions. Much of what he says makes good sense. He points to those Bible passages that highlight the 'for all' nature of Christ's atoning work, which by definition includes those of other religions. He points to Romans 2 and its revelation that God doesn't judge people for knowledge they don't have, and that their pursuit of the spiritual through 'persistence in doing good' has God's blessing. He identifies the theme of 'the righteous outsider' in Scripture — people like Melchizedek, Jethro, Rahab and Ruth. He notes how Paul, preaching in Athens, states that God is close to the pagans living there: 'He is not far from any one of us.' He raises the favourable attitude of Jesus towards foreigners like the woman of Samaria, the Roman centurion and the Syro-Phoenician woman. Such evidence rightly requires us to treat people of other religions today with Christ-like love and respect. No problem so far.

But then we remind ourselves of the unique claims of Jesus, which we believe wholeheartedly and are thus not ashamed to make known. So, if we meet, say, a Muslim, should we hold back from stating our conviction that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, that he was crucified, and that he rose from the dead — all of which Islam strenuously denies? No, we can't hold back. We might perhaps be more sensitive than normal in the way we present these things, but present them in due course we surely must.

As for Mohammed, the key figure in Islam, how should we view him? And, more importantly, how should we express those views to

the Muslims we meet? Many Christians argue that he was deceived and in no sense a prophet of God, but to say that to a Muslim would be to alienate him right away, leaving no bridge of relationship across which to convey the message about Jesus. Better, perhaps, to look for common ground. The fact, for instance, that Mohammed urged the people of his day to turn from polytheistic paganism to monotheism is surely an indication that he was, at least in that respect, a prophet?

Mclaren affirms his faith in the unique Christ, and urges us to introduce *him* to people of other religions (or none) rather than bash them over the head with ‘Christianity’, the religion. I agree wholeheartedly. It’s just how exactly to do it that can be difficult, and it’s that very factor which, for some Christians, might make them feel he has gone a bit too far. You must judge for yourself. But of McLaren’s integrity and sincere faith in Christ there can be no question.

The same would be true of David Tomlinson, whom I have known personally in years gone by, and with whom I had the pleasure of renewing contact more recently. He was until his retirement an Anglican priest in London, famous (some would say infamous) for conducting the funerals of some of the ‘great train robbers’, and widely known through his radio talks and his books, which include *The Post-Evangelical*, *How To Be A Bad Christian* and *The Bad Christian’s Manifesto*. He is strong in opposing the ‘us and them’ mentality; his *How To Be A Bad Christian* has the subtitle ‘...and a better human being’ — emphasising his conviction that the humanity uniting us is more important than the faith that divides us. If you take this view to its extreme, you devalue ‘church’ in its New Testament sense and the *legitimate* aspects of ‘us and them’. On that basis, ‘church’ is untied from its New Testament moorings and you can make it anything you

like — and some would say that Tomlinson himself has done exactly that.

He holds that the resurrection of Jesus, as classically understood, did not take place, and has stated that he has no interest in trying to convert Buddhists and Hindus to Christianity. He also says that the atheist's 'no god' could well be the equivalent of 'our God'. As for the kingdom, he writes:

'The kingdom of heaven, for me, is a state of consciousness — a different way of looking at the world, a transformed awareness that anyone may sense from time to time.'¹⁹⁹

And he does not believe in the literal return of Jesus. He has little time for doctrine, whether Bible-based or not. He calls it 'dogma' and uses that word in a pejorative sense. So, one begins to wonder what is left. But again, I can testify personally to his godliness and sincerity, and to my gratitude for some — if not all — of his insights. As with the other writers, you must judge for yourself.

Richard Rohr has a huge following among Christians of all backgrounds. He himself is a Roman Catholic priest and a Franciscan, based in the USA, and operates in the 'mystic' or 'contemplative' tradition. He is also a prolific writer, so there is no secret about his views. I have found much of his teaching helpful at a personal level, and his book on using the Bible²⁰⁰ fits in which much that we have looked at together here — including the 'Jesus hermeneutic'.

I admit to some concern, however, regarding his marginalising (as I see it) of Scripture in our quest to know God. It is true, of course,

¹⁹⁹ David Tomlinson, *How To Be A Bad Christian* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2012, p111).

²⁰⁰ Richard Rohr, *What Do We Do With The Bible?* (SPCK, 2019).

that in the aeons of human history, the Bible came along very late, yet God was not silent before then, speaking through the created order, and directly to the human heart. But we do have the Bible now. Jesus has come. Rohr still insists, however, on devoting a lot of energy (again, as I see it) to exploring how we can ‘find God’ via those other approaches, especially in those dimensions where it overlaps with the practices and insights of other religions.

Maybe that’s OK. But I admit to struggling with his popular book, *The Universal Christ*, which seems to me to overemphasise the distinction between ‘Jesus’ and ‘Christ’, turning the latter into a kind of universal principle that is found everywhere, and not just in Jesus. You must judge for yourself whether he has overstepped the mark. But, again, there can be not the slightest doubt about his Christian character, his moral integrity and his Christlikeness.

Taking care

For myself, I have come to the place where I am far less dogmatic on many issues on which, before, I had an entrenched position. I am much more inclined to focus on Jesus than on ‘Christianity’.

My attitude to the Bible has changed a lot. I love it more, as an unfolding revelation of Jesus, but can no longer give it the ‘almost worship’ that I was taught to give it in my youth. I see its flaws, its time-bound aspects, its stumbling progress, and I love it for its vulnerability in these respects. I gladly recognise that, in the broadness of its revelation, it is all I need for finding Jesus and knowing him, but I am reluctant now to be a purveyor of proof-texts on most subjects. I see broad trends in its teaching — like the clear trajectory towards non-violence and self-sacrificial love. But I am wary of pushing things much beyond that.

You will need to face up to the implications of all these things in your own way, and in your own time. In our final chapter we will think about how you could proceed.

19 - Where Do I Go from Here?

My aim has been to introduce you gently to some of the current challenges to traditional evangelical faith, and to assure you that you can respond positively to them without losing your trust in Christ.

More than that, I hope that, as a result, you will have a faith that is stronger, more vibrant, more robust and more worth sharing than what you had before. Whether or not I have succeeded, only you can say. But assuming you are still on track for a positive outcome, what is the best way forward from here?

The basics

I realise you may be thinking, 'Oh dear, it looks as if the whole Christian landscape is a minefield. Is there *any* ground that is solid and reliable?'

I believe there is. In spite of all the changes down the centuries, the Christian church has always held onto certain fundamental truths that it considers non-negotiable. These are encapsulated in the great creeds. Here, for example, is the Apostles' Creed and its twelve major affirmations:

1. I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth
2. And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord,
3. Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary,
4. Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried; he descended into hell.
5. The third day he rose again from the dead.

6. He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
7. From thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.
8. I believe in the Holy Ghost.
9. I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints,
10. The forgiveness of sins,
11. The resurrection of the body,
12. And the life everlasting. Amen.

I'm personally happy to hold onto those as the core truths of the faith, all of them plainly rooted in Scripture. But in the real world you will have to deal with more detailed aspects of the faith, including the issues we have looked at together in this book. What should you do about *them*?

First, resist the 'pendulum effect'. When faced with challenges to one's faith like those I have introduced, you should 'play safe'. Resist the temptation to ditch everything you believed before and start with a blank sheet of paper; that's probably more than you could comfortably cope with. Instead, be slow to let go of your long-held beliefs. Don't leap off the rock you are standing on into the relative unknown, in case you end up thrashing around in mud up to your armpits.

Better to tackle one issue at a time, exploring the new options available and venturing onto new ground only when you feel secure enough to do so. Then, after a breather, tackle the next issue, and so on. Hopefully, by abandoning the 'tower of blocks' approach to Christianity you will have been able to sever the unnecessary connections between the different elements and so find yourself capable of dealing with the issues one at a time.

The issues we covered

By way of summary, the following are the main issues we have touched on:

- Jesus comes first, not the Bible.
- The traditional view of the Bible as ‘inerrant’ is open to serious question. Scripture contains the kind of contradictions and ambiguities we would expect from any human author living in ancient times. God, in inspiring the writers, accommodated himself to their limitations, while ensuring that this did not hinder the Bible’s overall message.
- The Bible does not speak with one voice on many topics. It is thus unhelpful to talk about ‘what the Bible teaches’ on most subjects. If its message were clear we would not have today’s multitude of churches and denominations, all believing different things and all claiming to be ‘biblical’.
- The Bible is not ‘perspicuous’. Its *broad* message can be understood by all, and can lead to an appreciation of Jesus as Lord and Saviour, but its *details* are in many cases very difficult indeed to understand.
- The Bible is not a manual of church practice, of life skills, or of doctrinal correctness. It is not a contract that we can use to lever certain things out of God for our own advantage. It is not — at least in the modern sense — a history book. And it is certainly not a science textbook.
- The Bible is primarily a story — the long story of God’s redemptive purpose that comes to its consummation in Jesus Christ. And it is ‘wisdom literature’, in that it often presents us with a variety of conflicting options, and God trusts us to apply the appropriate bits wisely.

- What happens when you die? The Bible shows little interest in this subject, focusing instead on the end-time resurrection and the glorious new heaven and new earth of the age to come.
- God may not have created everything *ex nihilo*. If creating is part of his essential being, he has always been creating. The opening chapters of Genesis are not describing creation out of nothing, but how God brought order out of the existing chaos and assigned functions to various elements. This was so that he could live in the cosmic temple thus provided — the key ‘seventh day’ of Genesis 1.
- Christians should never fear the findings of science. In particular, the scientific evidence for evolution, including the emergence of *homo sapiens*, is overwhelming, and it can be held comfortably alongside a belief in Scripture as God’s Word.
- Adam and Eve were probably real people, but they were not the first humans on earth.
- The Pentateuch was compiled after Israel’s return from exile, its editors adding some new writings to those by various earlier authors, including Moses. The same is true of the Old Testament as a whole.
- Massacre, mayhem and genocide are attributed to God in the Old Testament. But God isn’t really like that. The Israelites, living as they did in a brutal era ruled by competing, warlike tribal deities, understandably imagined their God to be like that, too.
- Only Jesus is the true revelation of what God is like, so we dare not give equal weight to every description of God in the Bible, many of which were just stages in Israel’s journey of coming to know him.

- A key element of Jesus' message and example was non-violence. He — and his followers — 'cherry-picked' the Old Testament, rejecting its violent aspects. We should follow their example.
- Hermeneutics — how we interpret the Bible — is of primary importance. Scripture does not prescribe everything it describes. We need to look for the 'trajectory' of meaning, not just in progress from Old Testament to New, but beyond the New into the present day.
- Jesus himself is the interpretive key to the whole of the Bible. It's all about him, who he is and what he came to do. He also showed us how to interpret Scripture, and we should adopt the same ethical approach as him, accepting its proposals only when they are wholesome, up-building, loving and compassionate. This will touch practical realities like our approach to gay marriage.
- Only God himself is inherently immortal. If human beings are immortal, too, it is because God has graciously conferred it upon them.
- Hell, as a place of everlasting, conscious torment for all who do not 'accept Christ' needs rethinking. It may be that, if there is indeed a place for future estrangement from God, it will not last forever. Those who believe in 'conditional immortality' hold that it will in due course end in annihilation — the cessation of existence. Others believe that all humans are, in fact, immortal and that God's love will eventually draw every one of hell's residents to himself.
- We like complete systems of belief because they don't require us to think too much. This can be true of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, but applies equally to integrated systems like Dispensationalism and Calvinism. All 'isms' are suspect.

- The ‘hub’ attribute of God is not his sovereignty (control), as Calvinists maintain, but his love. Everything else stems from this.
- Calvinism, faced squarely, requires us to believe that God is the author of evil and that, since he predetermines and controls everything, there is really no such thing as free will; we are automatons. All this must be seriously questioned.
- The ‘open view of the future’ holds that God, because his nature is uncontrolling love, cannot unilaterally control human affairs. Some developments he may himself have settled in advance, but others he leaves to our decision and then adjusts to them. Or maybe nothing is settled in advance, but God works towards the fulfilment of his purposes in complete relationship and dependence on us, his creatures.
- Human beings are weak and fallible, and they die. But they are not fundamentally bad in the sense taught in the suspect doctrine of original sin.
- The ‘gospel’ is not just ‘how to get saved’ but the announcement that Jesus’ resurrection means the new age has already begun and that things will not be the same again. God has acted decisively in Jesus to begin the mending of his broken world. To keep this central, we need to give far greater prominence to the four Gospels in our study and teaching.
- The kingdom of God is the key theme that pervades the whole of the Bible.
- The atonement is too magnificent for humans to grasp in full. It requires many different metaphors to even begin to portray its wonder. We should hold our ‘atonement theories’ lightly.
- The ‘penal substitutionary view’ of the atonement is fine up to a point. But we should reject the notion, often linked to it, that Christ

appeased God's anger. We should also question the common idea that God's, or Christ's, righteousness was somehow credited to our account.

- The principal approach to the atonement in the New Testament is what has come to be known as the *Christus Victor* approach.
- Blood sacrifices are not intrinsic to God's dealings with us. He went along with it in Old Testament times because that was the practice in every nation. But he is not bloodthirsty and so does not require sacrificial victims. Jesus, in laying down his life, was not put to death by God, but by men.
- 'Justification' is not our being *made* righteous but our being *declared* righteous, or 'Not guilty', in the courtroom sense. It is God's declaration here and now to those who believe. He declares it on the strength of the good and godly life that they will, as Jesus-followers, live by the Spirit, and which God will find acceptable at the Day of Judgment.
- We should not detach Jesus and his work from his Jewish background. He personally became everything that Israel had been called to be but had failed to be, and thus enabled God to remain faithful to his covenant promises.
- The 'us and them' issue needs handling sensitively. Some get round it by espousing universalism, which is enjoying increasing support. Others don't go as far as that, but hold to the 'wider hope' that God is keener to include than to reject, and that those who never heard the gospel may well find salvation.
- We should question the common belief that death is the cut-off point for finding salvation in Christ. There may well be post-mortem opportunities, right up to the final judgment, and even beyond it.

- ‘Trinitarian theology’ teaches that Christ’s atoning work has reconciled *everyone* to God; all we need to do is make people aware of the fact.
- It can’t be right that our exercise of faith, or lack of it, somehow alters God, so that he is an angry judge towards ‘unbelievers’ but suddenly becomes a loving Father when we trust Christ.

There was more, of course, but these were the main points. It’s a lot to challenge you and will require your careful consideration over a period of time — maybe even a year or two.

You might want to read this book again and note the areas you want to look into further. Once you have done that, do some additional reading on those topics. In the final section I have provided some guidelines to steer you in what I hope is a helpful direction.

Remember, as you read, that you don’t have to throw out all of an author’s conclusions just because you disagree with one of them. Picking and choosing is OK. The important thing is to reach conclusions of your own that you can live with comfortably.

And don’t be afraid of settling, in many cases, for a degree of ‘I don’t know’. Some aspects of the Christian faith are so deep and complex that nobody will ever be able to say, ‘OK, I’ve got that one sussed.’ The atonement is a case in point. We all agree that Jesus, through his cross and resurrection, accomplished something of epic proportions that deals with humanity’s problems at the deepest level and somehow puts us in touch with God. The mechanics of that are beyond formulation. If you try to bring into sharp focus something that God himself has purposely left blurred, you’ll end up in frustration. Be content to hold some things loosely, including ‘atonement theories’.

Most important of all, perhaps: *don’t idolise the Bible.*

Respect it, yes. Hold on to your conviction that it is the Word of God, but without being enslaved to notions of inerrancy that simply can't stand up to serious scrutiny. Determine to grasp its bigger picture in a more comprehensive way and let that bigger picture be your guide, rather than focusing too much on aspects like the minutiae of Greek verbs and prepositions. Back off from too much proof-texting. Keep Jesus central in your hermeneutics, and determine to spend more time in the four Gospels that present him and his kingdom message.

Don't neglect church. One thing that is so prominent in the New Testament that it's not even up for debate is that following Jesus is a *corporate* thing. Yes, there's a place for 'me and Jesus'. He's your Saviour, Lord and Elder Brother. But if you take Jesus seriously, it won't be long before you hear him say, 'You're getting isolated. I have lots of other brothers and sisters out there who need your love and fellowship — and you need theirs.' Take it to heart.

Hopefully you will be part of a local church where the leaders are secure enough to cope with your questions and your misgivings about some of the traditional evangelical lines. But avoid doctrinal wrangling; it serves little useful purpose. On the other hand, if you can be part of a small group that meets to discuss progressive ideas, join it, but keep your contributions moderate and humble.

Concentrate on living a life that pleases the Lord, which is always easier with support from others. The author of Hebrews has some sound advice here: 'Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching.'²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Hebrews 10:24-25

Try to talk more about what you do believe than about what you don't. If you keep interjecting, 'Oh, I don't believe *that* anymore!' you'll soon get a reputation for being negative, and that will not benefit anyone. I'm having to work hard at this myself.

Christian unity

The call to focus on Jesus leads me to a final thought on Christian unity — a unity ruined, as we have seen, by too many different ways of following the Bible.

Some say unity is overrated, and that God is quite happy with a church divided into thousands of denominations and 'streams', with all their breakaway groups and offshoots. I can't believe that.

When Jesus prayed for his disciples, he added, 'My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, *that all of them may be one*, Father... I have given them the glory that you gave me, *that they may be one as we are one* — I in them and you in me—so that they may be *brought to complete unity*. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.'²⁰²

Judging by this heartfelt plea, unity is important to Jesus, and if we are his followers, it must also be important to us. According to his prayer, only when Christians are *visibly* united will the world be able to see who Jesus truly is and be drawn to him. Meanwhile, our petty divisions prevent that happening. Today, unity seems as far away as ever, alas, with the number of denominations and 'streams' continuing to grow.

Even within churches, individual Christians jealously guard their entrenched perceptions of 'the truth' and are quick to break fellowship

²⁰² John 17:20-23.

with anyone who disagrees. Not long ago, one man in my own church, hearing that I didn't believe the modern State of Israel to be a fulfilment of biblical prophecy, promptly denounced me as an anti-Semitic heretic, left the church and de-friended me on Facebook! No invitation to discuss the issue. No request for me to clarify my views. No 'let's agree to differ on this'. Just a door slammed in my face. I didn't want to break fellowship with him, but it takes two to tango.

All this must somehow change if we are ever to reach any semblance of unity. How can it happen? I would like to make a couple of suggestions. One concerns our beliefs; the other concerns the person of Jesus Christ.

Categorising beliefs

First, as to our beliefs, we need to *get back to the basics*. By that I mean separate out from the vast network of interconnected beliefs what are the fundamentals on which we can hopefully unite. Maybe the basics in the Apostles' Creed, mentioned above, could be a starting point.

Many of us have found it useful to have a three-tier system for categorising our beliefs:

- The foundation-tier is a small collection of *vital creedal basics* — things like the Trinity, the full deity and humanity of Christ, and his resurrection. These are the pillars of Christian faith that have marked the church in every generation. On this basis I am united with Catholics and Orthodox, Baptists, Methodists, the Salvation Army — just about every type of Christian except the cults.
- The second tier contains *doctrinal items of secondary importance*, ones that have given denominations their particular flavour. Here I would include items like the nature of the Holy Spirit's work in us; how the church is governed; the mode of baptism; how God runs the world; what we mean by the 'inspiration' of Scripture, and

many similar beliefs. I can lovingly agree to differ with people who take different views on these topics without writing them off as heretics or breaking fellowship with them.

- The third tier contains mainly *opinions on peripheral subjects*. Whether tithing is appropriate in the church. Whether the interpretation of tongues should be God-to-us (i.e. prophecy) or us-to-God (prayer and praise). Whether congregational praying of the Lord's Prayer is desirable or 'vain repetition'. Whether or not smoking is a sin. Minor hermeneutical issues. Pet theories. When asked my views on such issues I will come clean, but will never let them cause division.

I encourage you to adopt this approach, and to give far greater weight to the foundation-tier than to these other two. That will take you a long way towards meaningful unity between you and Christians from different backgrounds and traditions.

To the ark!

My second unity-suggestion concerns our Lord Jesus Christ — and Noah's ark. Let me explain (and this holds good whether you take the ark story literally or not).

How do you imagine Noah managed to get all the animals into the ark? Think about it. Getting a huge variety of creatures, living in different habitats over a large area, into one place must have been difficult indeed. Did Noah and his sons go on safari with lassoes, nets and cages? If so, how did they transport the animals they captured?

Years ago, I heard the American preacher Bob Mumford make an alternative suggestion that has stayed with me ever since. Maybe, he said, God put into all the selected creatures *an instinct to make their own way to the ark*. Imagine them all, creatures of every kind, different shapes and sizes, stirred by that same instinct and, from the four

points of the compass, slowly heading for the ark. The closer they got to it, the more aware they would become of other creatures, different from themselves, doing the same thing.

On this analogy, the ark is Jesus Christ, and we are the animals. And we are stirred by a common instinct: to get ever closer to him. Not closer to a set of doctrinal tenets or a denominational confession, but closer to *Jesus* — in the sense of wanting to know him better, emulate him more keenly and become more like him in character. If I dedicate myself to doing that, as I draw closer to Jesus I will become aware of others who are doing the same.²⁰³

Some of them, believe it or not, may be crossing themselves, others carrying icons which they kiss from time to time, yet others raising their arms and shouting ‘Hallelujah!’ Some will be wearing ecclesiastical robes or the habit of a monk or nun. Others will be in uniform and playing a tuba. But I won’t even bother looking at those externals, I will just be thrilled that they are seeking Jesus the same way I am. And as the great throng converges to become a jostling, happy crowd of worshippers, my delight will be to greet each and every one with a holy kiss — or its equivalent — and jump with joy at being part of this vast company of Jesus-followers. *Then*, at last, the world will catch a glimpse of the unity Jesus prayed for, and marvel, and know who he really is.

I encourage you, then, to focus on being a Jesus-follower now. You may need to look across the street, or across the denominational fence, to see others who are following him, but they are there if you have a yearning heart and eyes to see.

²⁰³ This will be the work of the Holy Spirit in us. He, we could say, is that instinct drawing us closer to Jesus and making us more like him (2 Corinthians 3:18). Jesus himself said that when he was lifted up — on the cross — he would draw everyone to him (John 12:32), and it is by the Spirit that he does it.

Sensitive and wise

You will never be able to join in this pilgrimage as long as you hide away in the kind of tower I have kept mentioning.

Our complex systems of inter-related beliefs keep us isolated from one another. They are not essential, as I have tried to show. So, if you haven't done so already, ditch your towers and systems. Rigid, hidebound evangelicalism is not attractive to seekers after God. Loosen up and experience afresh the Father's unflinching love, the warm company of Jesus our Saviour, Lord and Brother, and the beautiful dynamism of the Holy Spirit. You can't do that from inside a doctrinal cage whose door has been welded shut. I invite you, then, to see the challenges I have outlined in this book not as threats to your stability, but as cutters that could be the key to setting you free.

Once you are out of the cage, be sensitive in the expression of your liberty. Control your talk. Too much, too quickly, will alienate Christian friends who you need to keep on your side. Just let a new idea drop into your conversation with them from time to time. Their first reaction might be to think 'She's gone off the rails!', but let them see your Christ-like humility and love and they will in due time be ready to face up to some of the challenges for themselves.

Above all, if you have access to a pulpit, be slow to preach these things too vigorously. You will have taken a long time to reach settled conclusions, so you can't realistically expect your congregation to embrace the same conclusions on the basis of a 30-minute tirade from you. I speak from experience!

If we can all handle this matter with patience, grace and love, it will move things along towards the day when many of these ideas will become mainstream and the Lord's name will be honoured as a result. 'The Day is approaching', the kingdom is growing, Jesus is coming.

In the meantime, evangelicalism is changing; it must change; it will change.

How it changes is up to you and me.

20 - Digging Deeper

Below, I suggest some books that provide further detail on some of the issues we have considered together. Use the list to dig further into the topics that interest you. For your convenience, I have grouped them in categories, but bear in mind that these are broad categories, and many of the books cover issues in several of them.

Your book-budget might not be large, so consider using an e-reader like the Kindle or the associated apps; e-books are usually cheaper than their paper equivalents, and you can have them on your device within minutes.

Maybe you're not a great reader and one book will be your limit. In that case I encourage you to read the first one, by Greg Boyd.

On the value of a degree of uncertainty

- *Benefit Of The Doubt: Breaking The Idol Of Certainty* by Gregory A. Boyd (Baker Books, 2013)
- *The Sin Of Certainty: Why God desires our trust more than our 'correct' beliefs* by Peter Enns (HarperOne, 2016)

The Bible: interpreting and understanding it

- *How The Bible Actually Works: in which I explain how an Ancient, Ambiguous, and Diverse Book leads us to Wisdom rather than Answers—and why that's Great News* by Peter Enns (Hodder & Stoughton, 2019)
- *The Badly Behaved Bible: Thinking again about the story of Scripture* by Nick Page (Hodder & Stoughton, 2019)
- *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible* by Scot McKnight (Zondervan, 2008)

- *Inspiration And Incarnation: Evangelicals and the problem of the Old Testament* by Peter Enns (Baker Academic, 2005)
- *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* by Christian Smith (Brazos Press, 2nd edition, 2012)
- *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable To Read It* by Peter Enns (Harper One, 2014)
- *Five Views On Biblical Inerrancy* by J. Merrick & S.M. Garrett, eds. (Zondervan, Counterpoints series, 2013)
- *The Divine Spiration Of Scripture: Challenging evangelical perspectives* by A.T.B. McGowan (Apollos, 2007)
- *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the fourfold Gospel witness* by Richard B. Hays (Baylor University Press, 2014)
- *Four Views On Moving Beyond The Bible To Theology* by G.T. Meadors, ed. (Zondervan: Counterpoints series, 2009)
- *Beyond The Bible: Moving From Scripture To Theology* by I. Howard Marshall (Paternoster, 2004)
- *Surprised By Scripture: Engaging with contemporary issues* by N.T. Wright (SPCK, 2014)
- *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy* by RW Pierce and RM Groothuis, eds., (IVP/Apollos, 2005)

Hermeneutics and Sexuality

- *Homosexuality And The Bible: Two Views* by D.O. Via and A.J. Gagnon (Fortress Press, 2003)

The nature of God

- *God Of The Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* by Gregory A. Boyd (Baker Books, 2000)

- *The Uncontrolling Love Of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* by Thomas Jay Oord (IVP Academic, 2015)
- *God Can't: How to Believe in God and Love after Tragedy, Abuse and Other Evils* by Thomas Jay Oord (SacraSage, 2019)
- *God Can't Q&A* by Thomas Jay Oord (SacraSage, 2020)
- *The Jesus Driven Life: Reconnecting Humanity With Jesus* by Michael Hardin [2nd edition] (JDL Press, 2013)
- *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus makes sense of Old Testament Violence* by Gregory A. Boyd (Fortress Press, 2017)
- *A More Christlike God: A more Beautiful Gospel* by Bradley Jersak (Plain Truth Ministries, 2015)
- *Disarming Scripture: Cherry-Picking Liberals, Violence-Loving Conservatives, and Why we All need to Learn to Read the Bible like Jesus Did* by Derek Flood (Metanoia Books, 2014)
- *A Farewell To Mars: An Evangelical Pastor's Journey Toward the Biblical Gospel of Peace* by Brian Zahnd (David C. Cook, 2014)
- *Reading The Bible With René Girard* by Michael Hardin, ed. (JDL Press, 2015)

Genesis, creation and human origins

- *Creationism And The Conflict Over Evolution* by Tatha Wiley (Cascade Books, 2009)
- *The Lost World Of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* by John H. Walton (IVP Academic, 2009)
- *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* by John H. Walton (IVP Academic, 2015)
- *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn't Say About Human Origins* by Peter Enns (Brazos Press, 2012)

- *Creation Or Evolution: Do we have to choose?* by Denis Alexander (Monarch, 2008)
- *The Selfless Gene: Living With God And Darwin* by Charles Foster (Hodder & Stoughton, 2009)

Jesus, the Gospels, the gospel and the kingdom of God

- *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* by N.T. Wright (Harper One, 2012)
- *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel is News and What Makes it Good* by N.T. Wright (SPCK, 2015)
- *The King Jesus Gospel: The original good news revisited* by Scot McKnight (Zondervan, 2011)
- *The Day The Revolution Began: Rethinking the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion* by Tom Wright (SPCK, 2016)
- *Salvation By Allegiance Alone: Rethinking faith, works and the gospel of Jesus the King* by Matthew W. Bates (Baker Academic, 2017)

Eschatology: heaven, hell and future hope

- *Surprised By Hope* by Tom Wright (SPCK, 2007)
- *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment* by Edward W. Fudge [3rd edition] (Cascade Books, 2011)
- *A New Heaven And A New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* by J. Richard Middleton (Baker Academic, 2014)
- *The Evangelical Universalist* by Gregory MacDonald (SPCK, 2006)
- *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell and Universal Salvation* by David Bentley Hart (Yale University Press, 2019)

- *No Other Name: An investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* by John Sanders (Eerdmans, 1992)

Human nature and atonement theories

- *Original Blessing: Putting sin in its rightful place* by Danielle Shroyer (Fortress Press, 2016)
- *Christus Victor* by Gustaf Aulén (Collier Books, 1969)
- *Did God Kill Jesus?: Searching for love in history's most famous execution* by Tony Jones (HarperOne, 2015)
- *Sinners In The Hands Of A Loving God* by Brian Zahnd (WaterBrook, 2017)
- *Saints In The Arms Of A Happy God: Recovering the image of God and man* by Jeff Turner (Sound of Awakening Ministries, 2014)

Calvinism: for and against (mostly against)

- *Young, Restless, No Longer Reformed: Black Holes, Love and a Journey In and Out of Calvinism* by Austin Fischer (Cascade Books, 2014)
- *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* by Roger E. Olson (IVP Academic, 2006)
- *For Calvinism* by Michael S. Horton (Zondervan, 2011) and *Against Calvinism* by Robert E. Olson (Zondervan, 2011)

Paul and justification

- *Paul: Fresh Perspectives* by N.T. Wright (SPCK, 2005)
- *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* by N.T. Wright (SPCK, 2009)

Trinitarian theology

- *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity* by William P. Young (Hodder & Stoughton, 2007)
- *The Shack Revisited* by C. Baxter Kruger (Hodder & Stoughton, 2012)

The more radical end of the spectrum

- *The Meaning Of Jesus: Two Visions* by Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright (HarperCollins e-books, 1999)
- *How To Be A Bad Christian: And A Better Human Being* by Dave Tomlinson (Hodder & Stoughton, 2012)
- *A New Kind Of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming The Faith* by Brian D. McLaren (Hodder & Stoughton, 2010)

More from David Matthew can be found at

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and you can email him from there.