

## **Editorial: What do I believe about the Bible?**

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Not far from where we live is a thriving evangelical church, with a large board outside which states: 'We are a Bible-believing church'. I feel like daubing over the board the words, 'And I am a Jesus-believing Christian'. Surely it is our faith in Jesus which counts – not our theories of inspiration! The Apostle Paul, for instance, did not preach the Bible – he preached Christ crucified and risen. It is through faith in Jesus Christ that we are put right with God. The Scriptures call me to put my trust in Jesus – they do not call me to put my trust in Scripture..

This does not mean that I do not believe the Bible to be the inspired Word of God. After all, I am an Evangelical Christian! I have spent a life-time preaching and teaching the Scriptures. I begin every day reading the Scriptures for my own personal edification and guidance. But whereas I worship the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, I do not worship the Scriptures.

So what do I believe about the Bible? In summary – for otherwise a lengthy article if not a book is required – I believe the following:-

### *The living oracles of God*

On June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1963 at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II a Bible was given to the new sovereign: "We present you with this book", declared the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is wisdom, this is the Royal Law: these are the lively oracles of God". The phrase "the lively oracles of God" is a quotation from the Authorised Version and was used by Stephen in his defence before the Sanhedrin to describe the 10 Commandments, if not the Torah as a whole (Acts 7.38). What later versions call "the living oracles of God" (RSV; NRSV), "the living utterances of God" (REB) or "God's living messages" (GNB), has been surely rightly applied to Scripture as a whole. God's Word is "living" – in the sense that it is 'life-giving' and life-determining'. Or as Tom Torrance, Scotland's greatest theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote:

"It was through the word of God that the world came into being; it was through that word incarnate in Jesus Christ that the powers of darkness were vanquished and the barriers of the grave torn away; and it will be through that same word, read and heard in the Holy Scriptures and ministered faithfully, that Jesus Christ, clothed with the same Spirit by whose power he rose again from the dead, will surely transform our life and society."

As the Scriptures are read and expounded, God's word comes alive to us. God has not just spoken – he continues to speak. I love the way in which J.B. Philipps described his experience of translating the Scriptures: in his preface to *Letters to Young Churches*, he said that time and again he felt like an electrician re-wiring an ancient house without being able to "turn the mains off".

## *The inspired Word of God*

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

Paul here is using a term which was familiar in the ancient world. In essence he declares that God speaks through the words of Scripture. In the words of Thomas Oden, an American theologian and author of the ‘Interpretation Commentary’, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*:

“As our breath is in our language and mixes with our words, so does the breath of the Spirit enter into the language of Scripture and enable its very words to be means of grace. When we say God breathes or God writes or God speaks, we are speaking metaphorically, but confidently, of the way the heart of God becomes for us thoughts expressed in words”

Paul, however, is not enunciating a particular theory of the inspiration of Scripture. However, it is clear that he believed that God was active in the composition of Scripture. The Evangelical New Testament scholar Howard Marshall in his book *Biblical Interpretation* expressed it in this way:

“Just as in the case of the creation and preservation of the universe we can observe points where God intervened in unusual ways for specific purposes, so too we can say that alongside and within this general concursive action of the Spirit in inspiring normal human forms of composition in the biblical books, we can trace special actions of the Spirit in bringing special revelation”.

## *God’s Word came through men and women*

Unlike Joseph Smith and the *Book of Mormon*, the Word of God did not fall from heaven. In the words of 2 Peter 1.27 NRSV: “Men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God”. God did not literally push the pen as the prophet or apostle wrote. God did not use the prophets and the apostles as we might use the keyboard of a computer. Time and again, the Bible bears eloquent testimony to the fact that God spoke through people’s personalities as also through the very individual pattern in which he arranged their lives. We only have to think of Jeremiah and Hosea to see how much their experience and their message were bound together. Nor is it without significance that we have four Gospels and not just one: the very differences between them indicate differences of perspective and context.

I believe that Evangelicals need to be aware of the human dimension of the Bible. One of the challenges of theology is to wrestle with the divine-human tension of Scripture. In some ways this tension is akin to the divine-human tension in the person of Jesus: just as Jesus was the Word made flesh, so Scripture is the Word enlettered. There is a tension present which can never be satisfactorily resolved. Just as heresy emerges if we over-emphasise the divinity of the person of Jesus over against his humanity, we likewise fall into error if we over-emphasise the divinity of Scripture over against its humanity. The late John Stott writing in *The Contemporary Christian* put it this way:

“It’s double authorship demands a double approach. Because Scripture is the Word of God, we should read it as no other book – on our knees, humbly, reverently, prayerfully, looking to the Holy Spirit for illumination. But because Scripture is also the words of human beings, we should read it as we read every other book, using our minds, thinking, pondering and reflecting, and paying close attention to its literary, historical, cultural and linguistic characteristics. This combination of humble reverence and critical reflection is not only not impossible, it is indispensable.”

*God’s Word is trustworthy and therefore has authority*

Precisely because of the human dimension of the Bible, I find it difficult to use of the Bible such terms as ‘inerrant’ and ‘infallible’, and prefer to speak of the Bible as ‘trustworthy’ and therefore ‘authoritative’.

Some people have struggled to accept the trustworthiness of Scripture. They point out, for instance, that we don’t have a ‘first edition’ of any Bible book. However, I am impressed with the care with which Jews passed on their ‘oral traditions’; I am even more impressed with the way in which the Gospels were passed on, as evidenced not least by the absence of later church concerns. Others argue that any translation of the original Hebrew and Greek inevitably involves an element of interpretation; while acknowledging that this can be so, the fact is that there are few instances of wilful mistranslation. The reality is that the overall thrust of the Biblical message is clear – and to be trusted.

True, we have to take care on how we expound the Scriptures. In the words of 2 Pet 1.20, “no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation”. We have to distinguish between ‘exegesis’ and ‘eisegesis’; between what is prescriptive and what is descriptive; between what is cultural and what is of universal relevance. If we are honest, there are times when seeking to interpret the Scriptures that we need to be reverent ‘agnostics’ For the Bible does not set out to be a scientific textbook, nor for that matter does it set out to be an all-encompassing systematic theology. Yet for all the *caveats* I would argue on the basis of 2 Tim 3.16 that the Bible is ‘authoritative’ and “trustworthy” for the purposes for which God inspired it: viz. to guide people to salvation and to the associated way of life.

So, both with my heart and my mind I believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God and as such is the supreme and final authority for what Christians believe and how they live their life together.

*Evangelicals are not the only Christians to take God’s Word seriously*

To return to where I began, I find it sad when Evangelicals give the impression that they alone take Scripture seriously, and that therefore they alone can faithfully interpret and expound Scripture. This attitude found expression in the production of the *New International Version* of the Bible – as if only Evangelical scholars could be trusted to translate the Scriptures. The same attitude is found in many an evangelical church bill board which effectively questions the standing of other Christian churches.

The fact is that as a general rule when Christians in the English-speaking world gather for worship on a Sunday, far more Scripture is read in the great liturgical churches than they are that they are in Evangelical churches. True the sermons in Evangelical churches are likely to be much longer – but that is not a necessary sign that one group takes the Scriptures more seriously than another. Furthermore, in terms of the interpretation of Scripture, if my study had been limited to reading just the books of Evangelical scholars, I would have been so much the poorer.

True, I am an Evangelical – I long to see men and women to Jesus Christ. But I am an open Evangelical – open to the insights of others into God's Word.

Paul Beasley-Murray