

The Bible and Its Interpretation in the Modern World

'There are few dangers threatening the religious future more serious than the slow shallowing of the religious mind.... Our safety, is in the deep. The lazy cry for simplicity is a great danger. It indicates a frame of mind which is only appalled at the great things of God, and a senility of faith which fears that which is high. Men complain that they are jaded and cannot rise to such matters. That may mean that the matters of the world absorb all the energies of the great side of the soul, that Divine things are no more than a comfort. And if so, it means much for the future of religion, and much which is ominous. And the poverty of our worship amid its very refinements, its lack of solemnity Is the final index of the peril'

P.T. Forsyth (1848-1921)

As Christians we believe that the Bible gives us a comprehensive way of understanding the world in which we live and of our place within it. It gives us the 'Big Picture'. The world created by an omnipotent creator, and male and female created in His image. Sins distortion of the created order through the fall of Adam, the election of Abraham as the father of Israel who were to be the vehicle for Gods plan of salvation for humanity. Then the centrepiece of God's plan - the coming of Jesus Christ to bring to fulfilment all that God had promised through his life, sacrificial death and bodily resurrection. Then we read of the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost to empower the Church of Christ to testify to God's grace and love in Christ until he returns. Finally, the Bible sees the whole of history moving to the day of Judgment when the incarnate Son returns in power and glory, the consummation of his kingdom. Typically, we may see all this in 4 headings:

Creation

Fall

Redemption

Consummation

This assumption that there is a Big Picture which makes sense of reality in people's lives is openly challenged today.

We need to be aware as to what has taken place which has led the Bible to being ignored not only within wider secular society but also sadly within the Church.

From Providence to Post Modernity

Providence refers to God's care for the world after its creation, overseeing the processes of history so that it moves forward towards a specific goal (e.g. Augustine and his City of God) The doctrine of providence denies any cyclical movement in history and inspires future oriented hope rather than resignation and pessimism. However, the emphasis on history moving forward was easily combined with the conviction that things were generally improving. The belief grew further and more that rapid advance was within human powers to achieve. By emphasising the role of reason and downplaying divine intervention the seeds were sown for a secular variation to providence, the idea of **progress**. The certainty of our senses supplanted confidence in divine revelation. 'Dare to know' was the cry of the European enlightenment. At the height of Victorian confidence, and European colonialism, belief in progress reigned supreme. The twentieth century saw the crumbling away of that confidence under the shadow of the Somme, Auschwitz and Hiroshima. The fundamental question became whether or not life has any meaning or purpose at all. So, there is 'no story' which makes sense of 'my story'. One does not speak of truth but of what is true for me, or perhaps what is meaningful for me. The sense that there is a world beyond the self that it is possible and also necessary to know this world has become dim. Attention is concentrated on the self – internalised. Who am I?

We can see how this way of viewing the world is in sharp contrast with the biblical view. The Bible claims to present us with **the** way of understanding the world. It is a unique interpretation of cosmic and human history in which the human person is seen as a responsible actor in human history, always being called to respond to the initiative of the one who is both Creator and Saviour. The Church is the community shaped by the story the book tells. Through the preaching and liturgy of the Church and through all the avenues of art, dram and popular festival it provides the framework through which the world and it's affairs were understood.

The Self and the Re-Interpretation of God

In our society we have seen a change from the inner-directed person to the other-directed person. People are becoming less inclined to define themselves in terms of an internal core of attributes and more inclined to define themselves in terms of attributes they perceive in their contemporaries. The mass media churns out a multitude of images and styles to be adapted. Personal identity becomes increasingly associated not with one's inner life but with the projection of *public image*- the image and inner life are disengaged. A whole industry has now grown up to teach people how to market themselves. The self is not something that *is* it is constructed.

Because the Bible is a book pre-eminently about God as the Lord and of our need to bow before him in humble submission, a God who can only be approached on His own terms and not on ours we need to consider how that relates to the predominant view that God is there for us. Here the self is the alternative to God. It is in the self that meaning and morality are sought. As the self comes to dominate the shape that truth can take, the universal reach of Christian faith collapses. It can no longer offer the same word of grace to people in all times and places.

David Wells in his book **God in the Wasteland** speaks about *The Weightless God*. The weightlessness of God is concerned with his objective significance. It is concerned with our relationship to God as the unchanging norm of what is true and right in all places, times and cultures. If he is objectively true, then he summons all people to know him the same way through Christ and by the written word, to the same end that they may love and faithfully serve Him. Our contemporaries have a hunger for religious experience but an aversion to theology. There is a hunger for God but a disenchantment with doctrine. The unwritten assumption is that the only acceptable criteria of truth is the pragmatic one of what seems to work personally. The consumer culture in which we live has had a profound effect on our understanding of truth. We are all inveterate *shoppers* brought up with the belief that it is good to satisfy one's needs. In the feverish quest for individual fulfilment commonality of beliefs is pushed aside as an irrelevance. This feeds naturally into pluralism. As we seek to preach the message of the Bible in our society, we must always be aware of the subtle danger of capitulating to the seductive voice of designer consumer religion.

What then should our response be? Are there particular biblical themes which should be brought out again, treasures we have forgotten, that need to be re-applied to our present situation.

The Transcendence of God

The Bible glories in the God 'who *is above*'. It speaks of his bright excess, His greatness, the far reaching of His being that exceeds all human understanding. The biblical writers celebrate the fact that God in His being and character is not subject to the ebb and flow of life. The Bible declares that God lives *on high* (Psalm 113) His greatness is *unsearchable* (Psalm 145 v 3). Isaiah who had seen Him in a vision sitting on a throne (6 v 11) returned to the implications of this vision later when he saw God effortlessly exercising sovereign power over all creation (40 v 21-26) over all of human history (40 v 18-20) and in the lives of individual people (40 v 21-26). Such references occur throughout the New Testament (Romans 1 v10, Ephesians 1 v4-5, Colossians 4 v12). It is this God elevated over all of human life from whom Christ came. In John's gospel on 42 occasions John describes Christ having been sent into the world leaving God who is above and coming below (3v 17, 9v 34, 10v 36,12v 46)

Allied to this theme are the many texts which speak of Gods ways *eluding human understanding*. For Paul, God's judgements are unsearchable his ways inscrutable (Romans 11v 33-36). This is a part of biblical teaching we need to hear. Gods apparent absence from our lives is not always a matter of judgment. His government of the world is often morally opaque from our perspective (Psalm 10v 1). In Deuteronomy we hear that what is unrevealed will remain unknown. "*The secret things belong to the Lord our God*" (Deuteronomy 29v 29) The God of the Bible is the God who reveals himself, revelation is not a matter of human discovery but of divine self- disclosure.

However, we are to interpret the transcendence of God today the New Testament does not allow for the possibility of pursuing the new pluralistic theological strategy of moving away from Christ-centred faith toward God-centred faith. The reason quite simply is that the incarnation is fundamentally important: we know God only through Jesus. Jesus was not simply *the* example of the truly religious person. No, he was the one who had come from God. A Christ who was less than fully divine would not have been able to show us the Father of save sinners.

The Holiness of God

Today there is resistance to the idea that holiness defines the character of God and that love is not an alternative to it but rather an expression of it. This must be so. If God's holiness is his utter purity, his incomparable goodness, the measure of all that is true and right and the final line of resistance to all that is wrong and dark then love must be a part of this.

God in his holiness is deeply intrusive, cutting to the very heart of our inner life. (Hebrews 4v 12) When we succeed in cloaking the holiness of God, in focusing on his love to the exclusion of his wrath we unsettle the whole moral universe. We create a God who may be patient and kind but who is without the will to resist what is wrong, without the will to judge it, without the power to destroy it. Such a God lacks the moral authority to attract our attention let alone inspire our belief or our worship. Hope dies when it can no longer see through this vale of tears to the triumph of Gods goodness on the other side. The key to this triumph is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. When holiness slips from sight so does the centrality of Christ. A God who is not holy cannot deal with the great darkness of corrupted human life (Ephesians 2v 1-10) Such a God produces a Christianity which is civil but ineffectual.

Have we lost sight of the holiness of God? Is this not a critical doctrine which needs to be preached and heard in our congregations? Without this holiness of God, sin has no meaning and grace has no point. Surely until we recognise afresh his holiness the church will be just one more special interest group pleading for hearing in a world of competing enterprises.

God's Presence in our World: The Doctrine of Providence revisited

Is it possible for us to discern the ways in which God is at work in the world? There is a tendency today both in conservative and liberal theological circles to speak of 'what *God is doing*'. David Wells sees this working its way out in many different ways. South American liberationists see God's hand in the defeat of entrenched political power and North American capitalism. Feminist liberationists see Gods hand in the erosion of male power. The televangelist hears God whisper in their ears that he wants them to find their way into the wallets of their viewers. Everybody sees God doing something different.

In our rush to identify where God has shown his presence actively, we frequently overlook the biblical assertions that the providential work of God is hidden in the world and that we are called to walk by faith and not by sight. Unless God grants an individual the power to declare what he is 'doing' in the world (as with the prophets) the attempt to name such things is nothing more or less than an attempt at controlling the reality of God. Does it not mean that in practice it actually detracts from Christ's cross, which is the one thing that we are called to declare with confidence that God has done? Christ's work on the cross and the glory of his person are the sole measure that we have for reading what God is doing in the world today.

We need to recover our belief that God's greatness and sufficiency are accessible to faith and not to sight. Hebrews 11 is a great summary of this. The Church is called to declare the message of the cross not to uncover God's hidden purposes in the world. It is called to tell the world what God has said about its sin not to guess at what he might be saying through daily circumstances.

The Centrality of Truth

In the midst of a world which denies the concept of any external authority to shape and transform our lives and society the Church needs to have sufficient nerve to rediscover the Bible in our worship praise and prayer. It is all too easy to bow at the altar of orthodoxy to believe in the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible yet see it fall into disuse in actual practice. Without this transcendent word in its life, the church has no rudder, no compass, and no provisions. Without the word it has no capacity to stand outside its culture, to detect and wrench itself free from the seductive voices of contemporary culture. Without the Word the church has no meaning. Cut off from the meaning that God has given, faith cannot offer anything more by way of light in our world than anything else.

What we need most today is to hear that Word from God that can cut through the deceit and babble of our world, to reach our hearts and to set them aflame with love for the One to whom the written word speaks so clearly, the living Word, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.