

FIRST THINGS FIRST... *AND LAST*

The Authority of Scripture for Today

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Introduction: A “Bibline” People?

Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) was one of the nineteenth century’s heroes of the faith. A Baptist preacher in London for many years, he is said to have preached to over ten million people during his ministry (although quite how that was calculated is another matter!) and is, to this day, regarded as England’s great “prince of preachers”. Yet, he too had his heroes. One of them was the Puritan preacher and author of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan (1628-1688). Of Bunyan (*see right*), Spurgeon famously said:

Prick him anywhere; and you will find that his blood is *bibline*, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his soul is full of the Word of God.

Of course, Spurgeon was not referring to some alarming, hitherto unknown, medical condition; nor did he mean by it that Bunyan never talked about anything else. Spurgeon was simply highlighting the fact that the Puritan was thoroughly grounded in the Scriptures and constantly guided by them. That entailed far more than simply *knowing* the Bible well enough to quote from it (although *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is full of such quotations). It also meant that the Bible profoundly shaped his priorities, his aspirations, his ministry... in fact his entire worldview.

Spurgeon’s purpose in remarking on this feature of Bunyan’s life is clear. He saw it as something to aspire to, as a model for all believers, including himself. The implication, then, is that we too should be *bibline*.

And I would suggest that this is integral to what it means to be evangelical believers. If it was so in the nineteenth century, then surely it should be the same for twenty-first century evangelicals as well?

A Dangerous Aspiration?

To many contemporary ears, however, such a notion sounds strange, if not absurd and even dangerous. Influenced by the world around us, many Christians feel similarly. The Bible is a fascinating book to study and read, perhaps; it is a wellspring of spiritual sustenance, a guiding light in dark valleys. But to take it further than that, to expect this ancient anthology to shape the whole of a twenty-first century life, smacks of taking something far too seriously. In religious terms, that gets dangerously close to the sort of fanaticism which flies passenger planes into office blocks... doesn’t it?

Of course, that is to mix categories, conflate religious differences and provoke unfair parallels. Yet it is precisely the sort of leap that many contemporary Europeans make, and it is one which affects Christians deeply. Quite apart from our inheritance of centuries of hostile biblical criticism in the academy, the very notions of strong religious conviction and adherence to ancient texts are under attack.

This climate makes it easy to lose one’s nerve - especially in the worlds of the lecture room, laboratory, political debating chamber or theatre stage. The Bible is a resource for our spirituality - but it should remain closeted away in the world of our own private devotions. *Bibline*? Such a notion is alien and irrelevant. Why would anyone actually *want* to be *bibline* anyway?

An Improbable Aspiration

One of the reasons people are suspicious of the Bible is that they have never actually read it. People are quick to mention the apparently obvious contradictions, or allude to ethically problematic narratives such as the Canaanite genocide¹. Yet in my experience, they have never actually stopped to look at these accounts themselves, content merely to absorb second-hand doubts and scepticism.

This should not really come as a surprise. A recent survey of biblical literacy in the UK was conducted by the Centre for Biblical Literacy Communication (at St John's College, Durham) and some of their findings appeared in the mainstream media². Not everything was as negative as it might have been (as shown in their recent briefing document ³). 75% of British homes contained one copy of the Bible (in whatever translation), of whom a third claimed that the Bible was important to them. Yet amongst other things, they discovered that:

- 90% of those interviewed did not understand the significance of some of the Bible's main characters. Few could name the 10 Commandments.
- 85% did not know the stories associated with Advent, 93% did not know happened at Pentecost.
- 62% did not know the parable of the Prodigal Son, 60% did not know the Good Samaritan parable and 57% did not know about Joseph in Egypt (despite Lloyd-Webber's musical).

My guess is that across continental Europe, the combined impact of aggressive secularism and a catholicism less concerned with biblical spirituality than its protestant neighbours, has made the situation far worse. That is *bound* to have impacted us all. Not only have many of us missed out on biblical training and knowledge, but we also lack many models of bible believers in our churches.

So, even if we wanted to become bible (in the teeth of the cultural opposition mentioned above), what chance do we have of this becoming reality? The only hope is for us to go back to first principles, to unpack *why* Evangelicalism has always insisted on the Bible as its supreme authority. Only then can we begin to see *how* it should then shape us.

I. The Bible: an arbitrary authority?

Half a century ago, J I Packer was engaging with precisely these issues in his first, and ground-breaking book, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*. In it, he made this vital observation.

[The problem of authority] is the most far-reaching and fundamental that there is, or can be, between [Christian people]. The deepest cleavages in Christendom are doctrinal; and the deepest doctrinal cleavages are those which result from disagreements over authority. Radical divergences are only to be expected when there is no agreement as to the proper grounds for believing anything.⁴

This is an essential point, and goes a long way to explain some of the biggest disagreements in European, and indeed global, Christianity. It stands to reason: if we don't begin with a common starting point, what hope have we of ending up with a common agreement? It matters little what the specific topic for discussion is.

Yet, before we can establish whether or not the Bible is that starting point, we must understand how God operates in his world. For if *anything* is to have such influence, whether it be a book, a person or an institution, it must be proven to be the authentic medium for hearing God speak; and that entails a God who speaks in the first place.

¹ For an excellent and balanced treatment of this problem, see Part 2 of Christopher J H Wright's *The God I Don't Understand* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2008), pp76-110

² <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/britain-knows-little-about-bible-1722933.html>

³ This is downloadable at <http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/cblc/BriefingSheet2.pdf>

⁴ J I Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1958), 44

1. Faith in the God who speaks

It is axiomatic to Christian orthodoxy that God speaks. Believers have fervently held onto the idea from long before the time of Christ. Regardless of precisely what we think the Bible is, the testimony it gives of people's belief maintains from the start that the God who is there takes the initiative to communicate with his creatures. How else is the response of faith possible? For as is sometimes suggested, faith is 'trusting God to keep his promises and taking God at his word'. Faith needs a speaking God to prevent it being blind or deaf.

Notice how the writer of Hebrews puts it at the start of his celebrated gallery of faith:

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. (Hebrews 11:1-2)

Now at first sight, that appears precisely to corroborate the caricature of faith as presented by the so-called 'New Atheists' like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. Faith in 'what we hope for', faith in the future? Well who can know the future? No one! Certainty about the invisible world? that is the definition of blind faith, surely!

Yet notice how the writer continues:

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. (Hebrews 11:3)

That is intriguing. For the creation of the universe is, by definition, an event at which it was impossible for any human being to have been present. The only way that people could possibly know about this is for it to have been revealed by the one who was: God himself.

Notice also how the universe was created: 'at God's command'. This is a God who speaks the universe into being, a point reinforced by the poetic structure of Genesis 1 with its repeated refrains of 'And God said...' followed by 'and it was so...'. How God starts to act sets in place the way he will continue to act. Speaking seems to be essential to his *modus operandi*, the way he operates in his world. No wonder he starts speaking immediately with those created in his image, with words an integral part of their relationship with him (Genesis 1-2). No wonder he speaks to explain his judgment on their rebelliousness (Genesis 3) - after all, he could so easily have banished them without any explanation at all. No wonder he begins to enact his cosmic purposes of fall reversal and creation renewal with a promise to a wealthy nomad (Genesis 12). No wonder he is a God who makes covenants and even reveals his own name (e.g. Exodus 3).

In fact, from start to finish, the Bible is a testimony to, and an account of, God speaking. He explains what he is about to do; he reveals himself while he is acting; he interprets and explains what he has done. This is a regular pattern throughout the Bible's grand story. The crucial point here is that *none* of this would be knowable without his revelation. Yet, even more remarkably, we can also say that none of this would happen without his speaking. For as we have seen at the creation of the world, it is his very words that make things happen, such is his awesome power.

After his excellent biblical survey of how God is seen to speak, Timothy Ward summarises thus:

God chooses to present himself to us, and to act upon us, in and through human words that have their origin in him, and that he identifies as his own. When we encounter those words, God is acting in relation to us, supremely in his making a covenant promise to us. God identifies with his act of promising in such a way that for us to encounter God's promise is itself to encounter God.⁵

It was precisely this characteristic that distinguished Yahweh from all the other gods and idols of the ancient world, as Isaiah pointed out with his characteristic but devastating wit.⁶

2. But where can we reliably hear him today?

⁵ Timothy Ward, *Words of Life* (IVP, 2009) p30

⁶ Isaiah 44:9-20

Some years ago, I was at a meeting for newly ordained ministers at which an English bishop (who shall remain nameless!) was speaking. We were a very mixed group - and our theologies widely divergent. The bishop was expanding at length on the issue of authority in the church. He seemed to take great pleasure in his wide theological sideswipes. "No, our ultimate authority is not the Bible!" (thus causing the evangelicals to squirm). "No, it is not the early church fathers!" (making the Anglo-Catholics wince). "No, it is not the genius of the human mind!" (now it was the liberals' turn). At this point, everyone in the audience had been offended and was thinking the same thing (just as our speaker had planned). Then came his triumphant conclusion: "Our supreme authority in the Church is God Himself!"

Now, that is all well and good. But despite forming the end of that bishop's talk, it is certainly not the end of the matter. The question is not actually whether or not God should be the church's supreme authority. It would be a very strange sort of Christian who challenged that. The issue is *how*. How do we hear his will? And that is a question of communication and media.

I first heard the cheese analogy⁷ about twenty years ago and it has stuck with me ever since. The idea is that, whatever our worldview, and regardless of the topic in question, we all appeal to some authority or another. These various authorities can be categorised in four major groups through the acronym (in English) of a French cheese.

- B (ook)
- R (eason)
- I (nstitutions)
- E (xperience)

This analogy has relevance far beyond Christian circles. For example, **Books** effectively carrying the status of divine revelation can be found in all kinds of places: from the religious like Islam (*The Qur'an*) to the secular like Soviet Marxism (*Marx's Das Kapital*) or Chinese communism (*Mao's Little Red Book*). The authority of an **Institution** need not just refer to church hierarchies (and/or its accumulated traditions); it could also include a Politburo or Parliament.

Then we come to **Reason** and **Experience**. Both are more personal and individualistic, and even subjective, yet there are important differences. Reason of course is held to be objective, and it has accumulated its own canon of orthodoxy since the Enlightenment. But one of the challenges to modernity that postmodernity has laid down is the assault on this objectivity - an individual 'knower' is never as immune from prejudices and power plays as (s)he would like to admit. This has led many to indulge in a quasi-Romantic notion of private experience and the human spirit as the supreme guiding principle. This has greatest appeal perhaps in a Europe jaundiced by centuries of war and ideological oppression.

There is no small irony here. Despite our anti-authoritarian age (in which younger Europeans like to assume we have been able to cast off all the chains of power), we fail to see that we still appeal to some sort of authority to base our statements.

The point is not that we have to choose one and ignore the other three. That would be naïve and even dangerous (leaving people prey to all kinds of problems). The issue is which comes out on top, which has the supreme authority? For much of the time, this might not matter. If all four of them essentially agree on a point, we do not need to make distinctions between them. Yet, when there is a divergence of views, we are forced to choose. One of them will always come out on top, one of them will always have supremacy. To change the analogy, if these four authorities were playing cards, then when you shuffle and deal them out, one of them must come out on top. They cannot all have equal authority. This becomes clear in the great controversies of our day like the ethics of human sexuality or religious pluralism (society says one thing, the church hierarchy might say another, while the bible says something very different again).

⁷ I've not been able to establish its origins - but I first heard it in a talk by Australian pastor Phillip Jensen.

For the Christian, and indeed for the evangelical, we have to decide which, if any, is a reliable vehicle for God's revelation, assuming that he speaks. Or we could put it more negatively: are any so infected by sin and partiality as to be rendered unreliable?

It is easy to see how individuals are so infected (in heart and mind), however longstanding their faith. If apostles, including the apostle who was deemed by our Lord to be the rock on which his church would be built⁸ can get things as wrong as he did before Paul challenged him⁹, then who can be trusted? Then logically, bringing groups of such individuals together will not help (whether in the present, through the institution of the church or historically, through the body of tradition). It ought actually to diminish, not increase, the chances of reliability!

So it is easy to see why assuming a book written by over forty different people equally infected by sin is no different. Before we can tackle that question, however, we must clear away one other challenge.

3. A chasm that God can bridge

We forget, however, the importance of the grace and power of God. He knows what we are like, and always has. He knows that we are finite; he knows that we are rebellious, self-centred and partial. In fact, the gospel is predicated on his full knowledge of our true nature. Yet remarkably and wonderfully, this does not deter him from a relationship with us. He goes to extraordinary lengths to make it work, of which the ultimate evidence is of course the cross of Christ. As Paul wrote:

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:32)

It is surely not hard, then, to accept that God would both be concerned to cross the chasm of our finitude and sinfulness, *and* be able to find ways to do so. He must speak to us at our level. Anything else would be incomprehensible, rendering faith in him impossible. The Bible records a huge range of ways in which God has done this: dreams, graffiti, the circumstances of life, even a donkey.¹⁰ The writer of Hebrews opens his letter with precisely this point.¹¹ Ultimately of course, he reveals himself in a person - Jesus Christ, the Word of God.¹² It is not then much of a stretch to accept that he can do this through a book, and that is precisely the implication of what Paul famously tells Timothy about the God-breathed nature of the Scriptures.¹³ The Letter to the Hebrews offers the perfect example of God using this ancient book to speak in the present. In Hebrews 3 and 4, the writer quotes several times from Psalm 95, a song written centuries before which is itself a liturgical reflection on events in Numbers.¹⁴ Yet, despite the text's antiquity, the writer introduces it in verse 7 with the words, 'as the Holy Spirit *says*'. The juxtaposition is even more stark in the next chapter, where the writer describes Genesis 2:2 as God's speech as in the past (Hebrews 4:4) and in the present (Hebrews 4:5).

Calvin famously articulated a framework for understanding how God can do this, with his concept of divine accommodation. God has to lower himself to communicate, just as an adult does with a baby.

God... lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children... Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express what kind of a being God is, as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness. In doing so, he must, of course, stoop far below his proper height.¹⁵

⁸ Matthew 16:18

⁹ Galatians 2:11

¹⁰ for example: dreams (Genesis 37:2-11), graffiti (Daniel 5), circumstances of life (Acts 16:7), the donkey (Numbers 22:28).

¹¹ Hebrews 1:1

¹² Hebrews 1:2-4, John 1:1, 14-18

¹³ 2 Timothy 3:16

¹⁴ Hebrews 3:7-11, quoting Psalm 95:7-11 which refers back to passages like Numbers 14 and Deuteronomy 9.

¹⁵ Calvin's Institutes: Book I, xiii, 1

Calvin is even prepared to describe the Bible, a book he spent his entire career immersed in, as God's 'prattling... in a rough and popular style.'¹⁶ Such is the Father's grace and humility that he is prepared to do this, akin to the Son's readiness to wrap a towel around his waist and wash his friends' gnarled and stinking feet.¹⁷

Thus far we have established that God is a speaking God and that he is able and ready to cross the chasm caused by our profound limitations. It is not impossible for God to speak and be understood, even by finite, sinful human beings. Yet what of this book, the Bible? How is it possible to claim that this book is still God's primary means of communication with his people?

4. The speaking God complies with his written word

An excellent introduction to this question can be found in John Wenham's classic, *Christ and the Bible* (although, sadly this is now out of print - sell your shirt to get a copy!).¹⁸ He helpfully takes different approaches for each of the Testaments. Perhaps unexpectedly, the authority of the Old Testament is easier to defend, simply on the grounds that Jesus himself upheld it. The Old Testament governed every aspect of his self-understanding and mission. So for example:

- **Jesus submitted to it:** Notice what he battled with during his satanic temptation in the desert. In the face of each test, he fought back by quoting the Bible.¹⁹ Then in his teaching, he quotes it as the source of theological authority, as in the debate over divorce in which he quotes from the first chapters of Genesis.²⁰
- **Jesus fulfilled it:** This is what he famously taught at the start of his Sermon on the Mount (despite the fact that his opponents claimed otherwise).²¹ This fulfilment goes far deeper than simply fulfilling prophetic expectation. He fully complied with its ethical injunctions and trusted its theological framework.
- **Jesus' mission was shaped by it:** This can be seen in the titles he used of himself (e.g. his favourite, Son of Man, which is a clear reference to Daniel's vision of the human being given the authority of heaven²²); it can also be seen in his deliberate acts (e.g. the preparations he made before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem²³). The most significant example of this though is the way he describes his cross-mission as a *necessity*,²⁴ a theme repeated in conversations Jesus had after his resurrection.²⁵ It was made necessary not least because of the Old Testament's preparations for it.

In summary, the gospel accounts consistently suggest that Jesus understood the Old Testament to be primarily about himself. That is a staggering thought and no small claim!

I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfilment.
(Luke 22:37)

But what of the New Testament?

5. The speaking God prepares for his written word

¹⁶ Calvin's *Commentary on John's Gospel* (on John 3:12)

¹⁷ John 13:1-17

¹⁸ John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (revised edition: Eagle, 1993)

¹⁹ Matthew 4:1-11 - it is interesting to note how the 3 OT quotations given by Jesus come from just two chapters in Deuteronomy (Deut 6:13, 6:16, and 8:3). This reinforces the idea of Jesus as the true Israel, the one who remained faithful to God even in the wilderness, in contrast to the Exodus generation of Israel.

²⁰ Matthew 19:4-5 quoting Genesis 1:27 & 2:24

²¹ Matthew 5:17

²² Daniel 7:7-14

²³ Mark 11:1-11 - it is fascinating to see how Jesus goes out of his way to fulfill OT prophecy in this passage - but notice also how Mark's account is soaked in the Scriptures (e.g. Zechariah 9:9-10, Psalm 118:25-26, as well as the royal resonances of the title Son of David).

²⁴ e.g. Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34

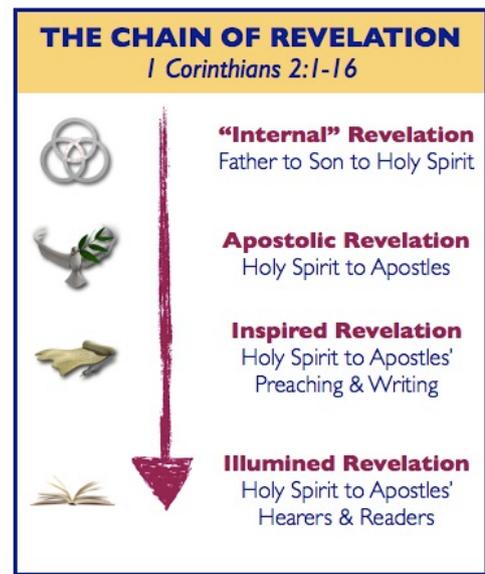
²⁵ e.g. Luke 24:

The disciples were regularly getting things wrong. They misunderstood Jesus, had different agendas from him, were rebuked by him.²⁶ It is a miracle of grace that he was keen to use them to launch his global mission at all. Yet he of course knew what raw material he was dealing with in them, and thus knew how to compensate for it.

- **Jesus expected his disciples to teach:** It is intriguing how central discipleship teaching is to Matthew's gospel, so much so that it is integral to the Great Commission he gives his first followers. Central to their disciple-making mission, they are to 'teach ... everything I have commanded'.²⁷ So it is unsurprising that we have several accounts of Jesus' life and ministry - they were no doubt primed to take good notes!
- **Jesus had more to say to his apostles:** The apostles were in a unique situation before Pentecost. They were followers of Jesus, and witnesses of his ministry, but were not yet indwelt by his Spirit. They were not yet the courageous gospel ambassadors that we see in the Book of Acts. This is in part why they were not yet ready for everything Jesus had to teach. So Jesus sends his Spirit:

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. John 16:12-13

- **Jesus sends his Spirit to inspire and reveal:** In the Old Testament, God's Spirit anointed individuals for specific tasks (such as being kings and prophets). In the New Testament era, the same thing happens (in addition to the Pentecost experience of the Spirit coming to all believers). So, for example, Paul sees what we might call a chain of revelation, which he articulates it brilliantly in 1 Corinthians 2. The Spirit inspires the apostles to speak as the means of God's revelation, through their circumstances and personalities to the world. He then works in individuals as they hear or read the apostles' teaching, to illuminate what has been revealed.



So in this way, Jesus anticipates and prepares for what we now call the New Testament. This also explains why it was necessary to establish an individual's apostolic credentials for them to have authority in the early church (and why Paul had to spend so much time defending his, 'as one abnormally born'²⁸). For if they did have that authority, then their words carried the weight of revelation, despite their sinfulness and mistakes. That Paul did defend his successfully is proved by the astonishing fact that Peter describes his letters with the weighty term of 'scripture'²⁹ - putting them on a par with everything from Genesis to Malachi.

It will hopefully have become clear by now how Trinitarian this is. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all intimately involved with, and committed to, the relationship with humanity, a relationship that would be impossible without divinely accommodated revelation. That this had to be written down and recorded for posterity has been described by a number of theologians as necessary for our discipleship. So Calvin stated:

²⁶ We can see all three in quick succession in Luke 9 (disciples' misunderstanding, v45; their sinful agendas, vv46-50; Jesus' rebuke, v55)

²⁷ Matthew 28:20

²⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:7, cf. Galatians 1:11-24

²⁹ 2 Peter 3:15-16

For if we reflect how prone the human mind is to lapse into forgetfulness of God, how readily inclined to every kind of error, how bent every now and then on devising new and fictitious religions, it will be easy to understand how necessary it was to make such a depository of doctrine as would secure it from either perishing by the neglect, vanishing away amid the errors, or being corrupted by the presumptuous audacity of men. ... we must pursue this straight path, if we aspire in earnest to a genuine contemplation of God;—we must go, I say, to the Word.³⁰

We have the Scriptures, God's authoritative word to his people over all ages. Before moving on to consider what effect that has on us in practice, it is worth making one final point.

6. Christ and the Bible: Dual Personhood and Dual Authorship

Some theologians have noted the parallel between Christ's Incarnation and the dual authorship of Scripture. In classic Christological formulations, Jesus has been described as 'one person, with two natures'. He is fully divine and fully human.

There is great mystery there. Yet in the final analysis, we can be content with the simple premise that God is able to do what is humanly impossible to conceive. Is Jesus infected by sin? After all, he was fully human, and more importantly, he was born of a sinful mother, Mary. The Bible insists: by no means! He is sinless.³¹ Uniquely in human history, he lived a pure life. But it was only through being clothed in flesh that he was able to redeem sinners. He accommodated himself to save us (as for example Paul articulates in the great servant song of Philippians 2). All this, without losing his divine nature.

Biblical studies over the last few centuries have focused on what might be described as their human qualities: the bible's individual authors, their styles, their historical contexts, their audiences and/or readership. Differences in perspective have been highlighted, nuances studied in depth, and many insights gleaned. Even the most cursory of readings make it obvious how different Isaiah was from, say, Jeremiah, or Mark from John, Paul from James. Understanding their varied contributions is one of the joys of biblical studies.

Yet this does not necessarily prevent them from being simultaneously divine in origin or purpose. This is one of the hallmarks of a traditional doctrine of biblical inspiration which marks it out from Islamic understandings of the Qur'an. The biblical writers were not human typewriters - their personalities, contexts and concerns all had a profound impact on what they wrote. Yet these were all graciously used by God for his purposes. They were actually a feature of his accommodation to our human level. The most remarkable aspect of this is that God was able to speak through sinners. Paul, for instance, is quite open about that - he described himself as the worst of sinners³², yet this is never seen as a problem affecting the nature and authority of what he was writing.

So Jesus is the Word made flesh, the God-Man, the Creator-Redeemer, humanity's Lord and Servant. He is the transcendent God living among us, God accommodated to our level.

The Bible is the Word made book, the doubly authored divine-human book - God's authoritative communication accommodated to our level by using human words and human authors facing human situations and problems.

It is probably fair to say that some of the greatest errors in handling the scriptures have occurred when either its divine or human authorship has been ignored or over-emphasised. As we move to discuss how we are to become bible people, we should bear this in mind. But hopefully by now, quite why we should become bible people has been made clear.

³⁰ Institutes, 1.vi.3

³¹ See for instance the astonishing statement by the person who arguably knew Jesus as well as anyone in adult life, the apostle Peter. In 1 Peter 2:22 he applies Isaiah 8:12 to him.

³² 1 Timothy 1:15-16

II. The Bible: a subversive book

The Bible is a lot stranger than we give it credit for. Sceptics never lose opportunities to remind us of this fact, and they are of course motivated by a debunking spirit aimed at undermining confidence in it. Consequently, our natural response is to go onto the defensive, and inadvertently domesticate the Bible by trying to make it more mundane and 'normal'. In so doing, though, we undermine its true nature. For if it is true that the Bible's ultimate origins lie in eternity and the mind of God, then we should expect it to come into conflict with prevailing views or personal perspectives. We should expect it to seem alien and strange some of the time - and that is not simply because it was written in various cultures that are very remote from our own.

The renowned, if controversial, Catholic monk, Thomas Merton, wrote this about the Bible:

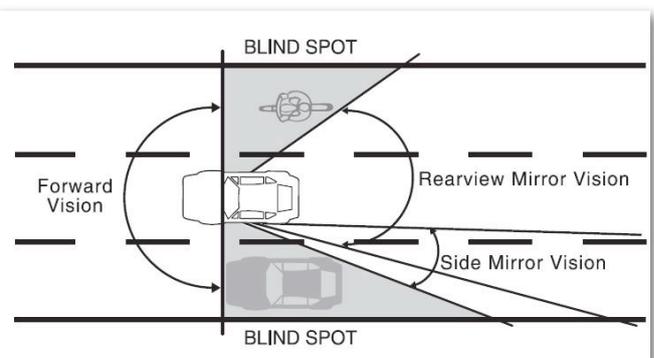
There is, in a word, nothing comfortable about the Bible – until we manage to get so used to it that we make it comfortable for ourselves... Have we ceased to question the book and be questioned by it? Have we ceased to fight it? Then perhaps our reading is no longer serious. For most people, the understanding of the Bible is, and should be, a struggle: not merely to find meanings that can be looked up in books of reference, but to come to terms personally with the stark scandal ... in the Bible itself... Let us not be too sure we know the Bible just because we have learned not to be astonished at it, just because we have learned not to have problems with it.³³

Merton is certainly not someone with whom evangelicals would have much in common theologically, and there are even points in this paragraph which we might have preferred to phrase differently. Yet his main thrust is surely correct. For if we find that the Bible merely confirms and never challenges our thinking, then we are bound to have gone wrong somewhere. In all likelihood, we are not actually living under its authority.

1. Unmasking Ourselves As We Are

If we are to deal with this problem, the first thing we must do is to face ourselves, to understand what we are really like. Of course, the Bible is a key means by which we can know ourselves better; but we are so often in danger of missing or avoiding what the Bible says, for all kinds of reasons.

- **Facing our limits:** everything about the experience of being human is limited (from our stamina and energy, to our brainpower, from our physical strength to our capacity for love, from our eyesight to our lifespans). This seems to be the way we have been created and wired by God for life. That is not, of course, a design fault! What it does mean, though, is that our very capacity to understand and perceive is limited (as we have earlier been considering). Our understanding of anything, let alone the Bible, can never be exhaustive or complete. This does not mean we can know nothing. It simply means we cannot know everything.
- **Facing our blind spots:** Our narrowed perspective will inevitably lead to 'blind spots'.³⁴ These are those areas around a vehicle that remain out of the driver's sight when he or she looks forward or uses rear-view mirrors. It is an essential feature of learning to drive that a new driver must learn how to compensate for the fact that we do not have eyes in the back of our head. When it comes to our



³³ Quoted in Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read* (Zondervan, 1999), p14

³⁴ The diagram is in the public domain, and taken from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Blind_spot.jpg, and originally sourced from www.michigan.gov/sos

knowledge of life, the universe and everything, our blind spots can be personal to us, or shared by a whole culture or society, and they are insidious. It is astonishing how one culture can completely miss what is patently obvious to anyone not inside it. So, for example, African friends of mine have observed how often Christians in the west largely ignore, or even fail simply to notice, the bible's challenges about greed and materialism. This is despite the fact that, surprisingly, the bible has much more to say about wealth and our spending priorities than it does about our prayer lives and faith!³⁵

- **Facing our sin:** finally, though, our pervasive problem is our sinfulness. It affects us at every point - and that includes our mind (the so-called 'noetic' effects of sin). The heart is deceitful above all things, as Jeremiah chillingly reminds us.³⁶ This means that we have a frightening capacity for self-justification and spiritualising, such that we can find spiritual and biblical reasons for proceeding with almost any course of action. We can thus be deceived into thinking that we are submitting to biblical authority while all the time doing precisely the opposite. A tragic example of this was the ways in which some South African evangelicals defended the injustices of apartheid despite the frequent and often explicit biblical injunctions to care for the oppressed and live out a boundary-defying unity in Christ.³⁷

So what do we do? Is studying God's word not rendered a hopeless quest by all this? By no means! We must come to the scriptures fully acknowledging the truth about ourselves, and finding ways to compensate for and overcome these problems. Thus:

- **Broadening horizons:** We should compensate for our limitations by drawing on others' experience and learning, by sharing with friends and attempting to understand others' perspectives. We cannot hope to discover reality and truth simply by being individual knowers, isolated from others and the reality of life in a fallen but redeemable universe. Books are an obvious resource. So is group bible study. If a group is working well, then the discussion of different perspectives on what the text means (as opposed to a mere pooling of different and mutually incompatible 'readings') will hone our understanding and shake up some of our narrow or limited assumptions.
- **Identifying blind spots:** It helps to start with the assumption that we have blind spots! If learning to drive is in part a matter of learning to be aware of and compensating for our blind spots (by turning around regularly to look over one's shoulder), so should it be when learning to read the bible. That is why cross-cultural mission experience is so valuable - often, not so much for what we can offer the cultures we visit, but for what we can learn from their differences in perspective and biblical understanding. Asking a visitor to your country or church / denomination to identify your blind spots can be uncomfortable; yet it could well be an essential element of discipleship.
- **Repenting of our sin:** God knows what we are like! After all, that is the point of the gospel - to rescue rebels and restore a damaged creation. It follows that we too should understand what we are like, and more importantly, what we have the capacity to do. We should come to the Bible acknowledging our innate reluctance to accept God's authority, repent of that, and pray for God's help to overcome it. If we have the expectation that sin does affect our interpretations, then we will be more alert to how it might be doing that.

In short, we could describe this as cultivating a healthy, biblical 'hermeneutic of suspicion'. In contrast to what many contemporaries might mean by the expression, this is not about pointing fingers at those in power, to unmask what their words and assertions hide. Rather, we are to point back at ourselves and be suspicious of our own motives and abilities to shrink from what God is saying.

³⁵ There are many different ways of calculating this - but some have estimated that around 2000 verses deal with one aspect of money or another, while only 500 explicitly describe the nature of prayer or faith.

³⁶ Jeremiah 17:9

³⁷ Isaiah 1:17, Zechariah 7:10, Ephesians 2:11-22

2. Revealing the Bible's Surprises

It has been suggested that the key to good bible study is not so much having gifts of great insight or a deep reservoir of scholarship to draw from, but the simple ability to ask good questions. Asking questions is something we all can and should do. Some are essentially a matter of observation: asking what a biblical passage *actually* says as opposed to what we think it says (which too often are very different things). Others require more thought and effort, such as those that establish how a paragraph fits within the overall thrust of a chapter or biblical book.

However, one essential but often overlooked question is to ask what is surprising or strange. Its advantage is that it preempts our ability to misread texts (either through a lazy over-familiarity, unconscious oversight or wilful). It also takes into account the Bible's counter-cultural, divine origins - for as the Lord revealed spoke through Isaiah:

*As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*³⁸

One way to approach this question is by simply asking how we might have phrased a biblical verse had we been its author. We will inadvertently follow cultural norms or assumptions - which means that the differences between our phrasing and the text itself will be revealing.

I will never forget one demonstration of this approach in a lecture on 2 Timothy by the British preacher, R. C. Lucas. In his discussion of Paul's famous analogies for sustained and reliable gospel ministry (namely, the soldier, the athlete and the farmer)³⁹, Lucas asked us to imagine how we might have phrased 2 Timothy 2:7 if it had been up to us. At first, it seemed an odd question and most of us failed to grasp his line of thought. Yet, his point was that we would have been very unlikely to have combined the two clauses of the verse in the way Paul did.

- Either, we would have written, 'Reflect on what I am saying, *and you will soon get the point.*'
- Or we might have said, 'Pray about it, and the Lord will give you insight into all this.'

Yet, surprisingly, neither is what Paul actually says. Even in this short (and perhaps unremarkable) verse, the apostle is displaying a wonderful understanding of God's economy in the world. Indeed, it gives us insights into the very topic of this paper, namely how God speaks today through an ancient book. To Paul's mind, there is no sacred-secular divide, no anti-rationalism at the heart of his convictions about God's modes of speaking. Timothy is to trust God *and* to use his mind - then, God will grant him insight and reveal his truth. The main purpose in using this example, however, is that it illustrates how framing a good question to bring to a passage can produce genuinely helpful and even striking insights.

Sometimes, the identification of a passage's oddities will actually help us to see its key themes or narrative dynamics. Take a passage like the Parable of the Tenants as Luke records it.⁴⁰ Jesus' parables are masterclasses in narrative preaching. They always reveal his uncanny ability to expose the reality of his hearers' hearts, and this is a case in point. Even before working out the identity of the story's characters⁴¹, its emotional impact ought to be obvious. What the tenants did was appalling by any standards, and most right-minded people would demand some sort of punishment. Wouldn't they? Yet look for the passage's big surprise. Surely it is the crowd's reaction to Jesus' reasonable and just expulsion of the tenants? 'May this never be!' they cry.⁴² It is very strange. Yet it is precisely this response that provokes his stark warnings about the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone⁴³ and it suggests that they have grasped something of

³⁸ Isaiah 55:9

³⁹ 2 Timothy 2:1-6

⁴⁰ Luke 20:9-19

⁴¹ In contrast to the vast majority of Jesus' parables (which are emphatically not allegories), this parable will only work if we do identify the story's individual characters. This is clear because it is evidently an updating of Isaiah's Song of the Vine (Isaiah 5), in which an interpretative key is explicitly revealed (in Isaiah 5:7).

⁴² Luke 20:16

⁴³ Jesus is quoting Psalm 118:22

their vulnerability and culpability. Luke hints at this in 20:19 when we are told that Jesus' opponents 'knew he had spoken this parable against them'. If they knew that, they certainly realised something of what Jesus claimed about himself. The fact that they still went ahead with their schemes to destroy him is therefore all the more shocking. It further illustrates the irrationality of sin. Consequently, the passage's challenges can now be articulated much more starkly.

This is of course an all too brief discussion of the approach, but it will hopefully be sufficient to provoke further investigation.

3. Dialoguing with the World

In suggesting that the Bible is our supreme authority, and that it is by definition a counter-cultural book, I am not claiming for one minute that we should ignore the learning of the world. That would be foolish and arrogant. It would also illustrate a failure to take our limitations (as outlined above) seriously.

For in his grace, God has generously distributed great gifts throughout humanity. Gifts of intellectual power and wonderful creativity are by no means limited to the subjects of his kingdom. However, if all truth is true because God made it true, then we should not have anything to fear from the quest for truth *per se*. Of course, all on the quest have tainted motives and limited insight; but that hardly means they have nothing to contribute to the body of human knowledge. Sometimes, they might even be proven to have understood something better than Christians. It is important to realise what is going on here.

A classic example might be the prevailing views of the structure of the universe in ancient and medieval cosmology. The assumption that the earth sits at the centre of the universe is a perfectly reasonable one - the experience of life on earth naturally leads to such a conclusion. It is no wonder that many cultures have described dawn as 'the rising of the sun' because that is precisely what it *looks like* to those who live on this planet. It would take the insight and calculations of brilliant scientists to recognise that the reality was very different. Yet the Copernican revolution, which turned our perceptions of cosmology on their head by restoring the Sun to the centre of the Solar System, met with great opposition from those who felt strongly that this contradicted Scripture. "After all, the Bible frequently refers to 'the rising of the sun' as well, doesn't it?⁴⁴ And the Bible is our ultimate authority!"

What those who first resisted Copernicus failed to appreciate was that, while the Bible does indeed use this language, this does not mean the Bible necessitates belief in a geocentric universe. That scientific development drove bible readers back to the text. They then discovered what it actually says rather than what they thought it said. The cosmological consensus amongst Christians has changed such that very few evangelicals would defend geocentricism today. The Bible has not changed, merely our understanding of what it has always said.

The same is true even of our own personal experiences as Christians. Ever since my conversion to Christ at 18 years old, I have always loved that truth so essential to the gospel, namely that the Father's love for us is revealed in Jesus, and supremely at the cross.⁴⁵ It has been foundational to my worldview and my theological understanding. However, I had never really reflected deeply on what *it was like* for the Father to see what Jesus endured... until I became a father myself eleven years ago. Suddenly, filled with new, paternal instincts, the mere thought of my child suffering provoked the deepest anxiety and pain. The cost for God of our salvation took on deeper significance. It is not that the Bible had changed at all - only my perceptions of it, as the result of my new experiences.

⁴⁴ For example, Psalm 50:1 and Ecclesiastes 1:5

⁴⁵ For example, Romans 5:6-8

This is not to say that the world always gets it right. Human reason is flawed, as we have repeatedly affirmed, as is the perspective brought about by our emotions and experiences. But there should be a dialogue as we humbly listen to what others have learned, accepting that their insights and perspectives have things to teach us. But we then test everything (including our own interpretations) through the Bible's filter - it may be that we have to change our understanding of it in the light of these other insights, or that we reject what has been suggested. Either way, the crucial thing is simply that the Bible must act as the arbiter (as argued above), it must have the final word - if it is truly our final, authoritative word from God.

4. **Worshipping the speaking God**

Lest this has been felt too negative an approach, we need to see the positive impact on our handling of the Bible that repentance has. A Christian convert has undergone a spiritual Copernican revolution, in that now the centre of the universe is not me but the God who made me and us all. This invariably changes how we approach the text. At the very least, we learn to realise that the individuals in the biblical narrative are not the heroes - even the supposedly great ones like Moses, David and Solomon were deeply flawed. God is the hero, throughout. If we do identify with characters as we read, we find that we are carried with them on the path to this revolution. For the path to Christian maturity is one that leads us to wonder, holy fear and above all God-centredness.

So our we should read with a constant readiness to worship. Eugene Peterson describes this perfectly as a "hermeneutic of adoration" and he is worth quoting at length here.

The three modern masters of the hermeneutic of suspicion are Nietzsche, Marx and Freud. They taught us well to take nothing at face value. Much of this is useful. We don't want to be taken in, manipulated by clever wordsmiths or enticed by skilled publicists and advertisers...

But as we narrow our eyes in suspicion, the world is correspondingly narrowed down. And when we take these reading habits to our reading of Holy Scripture, we end up with a small sawdust heap of facts.

Paul Ricoeur has wonderful counsel for people like us. Go ahead, he says, maintain and practice your hermeneutic of suspicion. It is important to do this. Not only important, it is necessary. There are a lot of lies out there; learn to discern the truth and throw out the junk. But then reenter the book, the world, with what he calls a 'second naïveté' Look at the world with childlike wonder, ready to be startled into surprised delight by the profuse abundance of truth and beauty and goodness that is spilling out of the skies at every moment. Cultivate a hermeneutics of adoration - see how large, how splendid, how magnificent life is.

And then practice this hermeneutic of adoration in the reading of Holy Scripture. Plan on spending the rest of your lives exploring and enjoying the world both vast and intricate that is revealed by this text.⁴⁶

This hermeneutic must begin with gratitude. Gratitude is a great antidote to human pride and self-sufficiency, and in reading the Scriptures we have much to be grateful for God for: the very fact of having his word, having minds to understand it, and above all being indwelt by his Holy Spirit who illumines it. This is crucial - for discussions of final authority and biblical interpretation tend to become cold and impersonal, whereas the Bible is essential to the deepening of our *relationship* with the living God.

III. The Bible: starting *and* ending with it

It will be clear now how important the Bible is for our discipleship and for the development of a Christian worldview. If everything we have said about the Bible's divine origins and authority is true then it follows that we must take it seriously, more seriously in fact than even evangelicals do. For it means building everything on the rock of its foundations. After all, that is what Jesus

⁴⁶ Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book*, (Hodder & Stoughton), p68-69

was driving at in the conclusion to his famous Sermon on the Mount. His parable's builders are rendered wise or foolish by their readiness to 'hear these words of mine and put them into practice'.⁴⁷

Furthermore, it is challenging, to say the least, to find how central Jesus makes his teaching to his final judgment:

If anyone is ashamed of me *and my words* in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy ones.⁴⁸

We have seen that we are to engage with what the world says and has learned (in every sphere and field: from psychology to biology, from political aspiration to artistic expression, from ecological activity to parenting, and of course from systematic theology to apologetics). Biblical authority means nothing if it does not necessitate the Bible being our lens and filter for this engagement. It is a lens for it gives us perspectives with which to see clearly, it provides a metanarrative by which to discern. It is a filter, for it then gives us grounds for rejecting ideas inconsistent with it.

We must appreciate, though that this will entail greater work and effort in our engagement. For it will demand that we analyse the assumptions and metanarratives that lie behind the assertions we are engaging with. We might find, for instance, that we agree with a statement that someone makes: for example, the fact that it is a 'good thing' for children to be educated. Yet, on further investigation, we discover that this statement has been made on the basis of very different assumptions: for example, the modern humanist notion that people are essentially good and that education and opportunities are all that is required to bring out the best in them. This clearly contradicts a biblical worldview, which insists that while we were certainly created perfect and in God's image, we are now fallen and that this fallenness radically damages us. We are not as bad as we could be (God's image remains) but we are by no means as good as we should be (we are sinful at heart). Establishing the differences between our starting points will make us more wary of necessarily agreeing with everything else this person asserts. For example, he or she might see a primary goal of education as the overcoming of superstition (by which they mean any form of religious or spiritual belief).⁴⁹

This does not mean we *should* disagree with everything that person says (as some Christians seem to have a habit of doing with non-believers). That betrays a lack of humility and self-awareness for all the reasons we have earlier discussed. This is merely a plea to be discerning. The Bible should be our lens and filter. It should be our authority.

Furthermore, we should be wary of adopting categories and starting points that are not biblical. This does not mean we should never do this. We should merely, again, be discerning. For if we are not careful, using non-biblical categories can mean that we end up miles away from the Bible, or that we force the Bible to squeeze into an ill-fitting framework. How this works out for each of our disciplines and fields of expertise will vary, which is why professional Christian groupings and networks are essential. It is important that we constantly evaluate and apply intellectual creativity and rigour to our studies. Otherwise we will end up with a schizophrenic faith - a privatised discipleship with functionally worldly professional lives.

⁴⁷ Matthew 7:24-27

⁴⁸ Mark 8:38 - my italics

⁴⁹ an example of this is Camp Quest UK (an offshoot of an American group). Its website says:

Camp Quest is a secular summer camp programme for children aged 8-17, dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry, critical and creative thinking, scientific method, self-respect, ethics, competency, democracy and free speech. The overall purpose is to provide interested children, regardless of their personal beliefs, with a residential summer camp free from religious dogma. The camp is dedicated to the advancement of tolerance, empathy, self-respect, self-expression, rationality, critical and creative thinking, cooperation, and ethics. (<http://www.camp-quest.org.uk/frequently-asked-questions/what-is-camp-quest/>)

Another common mistake is to assume that submitting to the Bible's authority is simply a matter of starting with it. It is not unusual to find that someone starts biblically, only to then use it as a diving board. They might balance on the board, bounce a few times, then dive into their subject, only to end up by swimming far away from where they started. This can happen in different ways.

- The most obvious is the proof-text. A controversial or tangential assertion can be made to sound authoritative if prefaced by a biblical verse, regardless of that verse's original context. Yet this approach is dangerous precisely because the Bible can be made to say anything, if quoted out of context. A crude illustration of this is the claim that the Bible asserts that 'there is no God'. Those words can of course be found in the Bible - yet in Psalm 14:1 they are prefaced by the all important phrase, 'The fool says in his heart...'
- A subtler, and more dangerous, variation is to use biblical categories, but to redefine them in non-biblical ways. This is notoriously hard to spot, and yet seems prevalent in many debates within evangelicalism. It is, of course, entirely legitimate to challenge common definitions (however affectionately held) on the basis of them not being biblical enough. Yet all too often, that is not what is going on. An old teacher of mine used to intone the axiom that 'Bible words have Bible meanings'. To find out what a word like repentance or justification means, we should not go to the Oxford English Dictionary. Instead we should use a Bible dictionary that has surveyed the full sweep of scriptural teaching. This is one of the supreme tasks of the systematic theologian. Otherwise, we might end up defining repentance, with the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, as having 'regret or contrition for past action'.⁵⁰ The danger is that, while perhaps a reasonable of common parlance, it is not what the New Testament understands it to be. Paul, for one, understands regret as a actually a precursor of repentance, since that is about a change of direction in behaviour:

Godly sorry brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. (2 Corinthians 7:10)

The issue, then is to start where the Bible starts, and allow it sufficiently to shape our direction that we end up with conclusions that are consistent with it.

IV. The Bible: a narrative to reach a culture

While much of this discussion of biblical authority will seem alien, if not untenable in contemporary European culture, there have, ironically, been few better times than ours to proclaim the Bible's story. For the Bible is at its root a story, perhaps the grandest narrative of them all. Yet, if there is a biblical genre that evangelicals tend to be least adept at expounding and applying, it is narrative, despite the fact that narrative accounts for a vast proportion of the whole book! This is tragically detrimental to our mission.

For, as D. A. Carson as often noted, our culture is crying out for a story to be part of, at the same time as being highly suspicious of overly tight, and apparently constraining, systems. This gives a biblical theologian, an expositor whose message is grounded, shaped and directed by the Bible, huge opportunities. As Carson writes:

Recognized or not, acknowledged or not, there is a profound and bitter emptiness at the hearts of many men and women in Western culture. I am not therefore suggesting that the gospel be reshaped to become that which meets my emptiness: so crassly put, this would be one more way by which evangelicalism is only a whisker from affirming that God exists in order to meet my needs, as I perceive them. Human emptiness and moral confusion must be traced to its roots in biblical theology; only then in that framework can the historic gospel truly address the underlying problem.⁵¹

⁵⁰ *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Fifth edition (OUP, 2003)

⁵¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, (IVP, 1996), p495

He then proceeds to explain how we can help people to see this with an understanding of the progression of redemption history.

In short, the good news of Jesus Christ is virtually incoherent unless it is securely set into a biblical worldview... One is simultaneously setting forth a structure of thought, and a meta-narrative; one is constructing a worldview, and showing how that worldview is grounded in the Bible itself. One is teaching people how to read the Bible. For these reasons, evangelism might wisely become, increasingly, a subset of biblical theology.⁵²

Too much mission and outreach merely uses the bible (at best), and at worst is actually too embarrassed to mention it. We might have moved away from the simple, evidentialist approach to apologetics, we might find great scope in a presuppositionalist approach, but the danger is that these different approaches supplant, rather than support, the sheer apologetic power of unpacking the biblical story itself. As Spurgeon famously declared:

Defend the Bible? Would you defend a lion? Loose him; and let him go!

In a sense, the biblical expositor is merely letting the Bible loose. Isn't this what God himself pointed to through Isaiah:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

It should be the case that every sermon or bible study that is faithful to Scripture is evangelistic in the sense that is full of the evangel or good news of God's grace and eternal purposes. Yet in the light of all that we have seen, the reverse should also be true. All evangelism should be scriptural, in content, shape and purpose. Otherwise, how can we have confidence that what we claim and proclaim is consistent with what God has revealed? I would further add that the best way to ensure this, when it comes to preaching at any rate, is that it should be expository. This means that it seeks to allow a text to govern the content and theology as well as the mood and shape of the message. There are many varied ways of doing this - we need always to be culturally appropriate. Yet the impetus should always be the same. The preacher's task was perhaps best summed up by John Stott's oft repeated definition:

To preach is to open up the inspired text with such faithfulness and sensitivity that God's voice is heard and God's people obey him.

It's hard to improve on that!

V. The Power of a Bibline Life

In the end, however, the most powerful gospel apologetic is not an argument at all. It is the power of a life thoroughly and wonderfully changed by the grace of God. In the light of all we have said, we could therefore suggest that this is the same thing as a bibline life. In the face of persecution and hardship, the apostle Peter urged his readers to:

Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Peter 2:12)

A bibline life will be modelled on the one who uniquely lived a bibline life: the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yet this can hardly be the most important reason for living like this. Surely, our supreme motivation, the reason that outflanks all others, is the desire to live for and serve our Saviour God. For it is the case that the Bible is his revelation to his world, how can we even contemplate

⁵² D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, (IVP, 1996), p502

living any other way. For we are all called to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to be holy and pleasing to him, in the light of God's incredible and awe-inspiring mercy.⁵⁵

So it is worth taking a regular spiritual health check to evaluate the extent to which we are striving to be more bibline. We can do a lot worse than to ask ourselves these simple questions:

- When was the last time I changed what I think because of what I found in the Bible?
- When was the last time I changed my behaviour because of what I found in the bible?
- How often do you allow yourself to listen to others who engage with the Bible (e.g. in small group discussion group)?
- Do I allow my spiritual convictions to shape and influence my professional and working life? Am I seeking to integrate my beliefs and my working life?
- Am I reaching out with the Christian gospel? If so, how integral is the Bible to what I communicate?

Some personal suggestions for further reading

Introductory

Why Trust the Bible?	Amy Orr-Ewing	<i>IVP (2008)</i>
Understanding the Bible	John R. W. Stott	<i>Scripture Union (rev 2005)</i>
God's Big Picture	Vaughan Roberts	<i>IVP (revised 2009)</i>
Eat This Book	Eugene Peterson	<i>Hodder & Stoughton (2008)</i>
How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth	Fee & Stuart	<i>Zondervan (2005)</i>

Going Deeper

The Revelation of God (<i>Contours of Christian Theology Series</i>)	Peter Jensen	<i>IVP (2002)</i>
Words of Life - Scripture as the living and active word of God	Timothy Ward	<i>IVP (2009)</i>
The Trustworthiness of God - Soundings and Perspectives on the Nature of Scripture	Ed. Paul Helm and Carl Trueman	<i>Apollos (2002)</i>
A Clear and Present Word - the Clarity of Scripture	Mark D Thompson	<i>Apollos (2006)</i>

⁵⁵ From Romans 12:1