

TRUTH AND SUFFICIENCY - THE BIBLE IN A POSTMODERN AGE

This plenary session is about the truth and sufficiency of Scripture, both as the ultimate authority under God for all Christians at all times, but also with particular reference to our postmodern age.

David (Peterson) and I will speak in alternate blocks. I will focus primarily on the theme of scriptural truth and David on scriptural sufficiency.

However our shared intention is to contribute to a Church of England which not only believes Scripture, but which also obeys it!

My first section is titled

SCRIPTURAL TRUTH ON THE FRONT LINE

The Bible has a place of unique authority in the Church of God. John Stott explains this with typical clarity 'The Bible is a unique book: no other book resembles it. For it is God's word through human words.' John Stott

And if it is God's word, from one point of view, who am I to defend it?

Spurgeon's great saying is well known, but still worth repeating.

'Defend the Bible? I would just as soon defend a lion. Just turn the Bible loose. It will defend itself.'

But if scripture itself calls us to be ready to give an account for the hope we have in God's Son, his Incarnate Word. Then it is also reasonable that we be prepared to give an account for our trust in God's written word.

There **is** a vital distinction between:

Our defence of Scripture - which is always in response to the challenges made and questions asked by the society of our time, and so always takes place on today's cultural front line, and

The central theological reasons why we recognize and submit to God's authority through Scripture.

These hold true, irrespective of our particular cultural context.

For the remainder of this session I will focus on our response to contemporary challenges about Scripture and truth.

So to the front line we must go.

But the first thing we find is that during the life time of most of the people in this hall, the frontline has moved.

What was the old front line?

The Evangelical movement, as we know it, took its shape in relation to the Enlightenment. It was forged in the fires of the Evangelical revival to establish a form of biblically faithful Christianity at a time of cultural change. It had clear continuity with previous forms of Scripture centred Christianity, but also had some new features.

In other words it was a good piece of Gospel and culture work.

On that front line the enemy was

Enlightenment rationalism, and increasingly scepticism and secularism, which challenged

- The historical trustworthiness of Scripture
- The credibility of a supernatural world view
- The supreme authority of Scripture

These have been the frontline issues for Evangelical apologetics.

And in their defense some key concepts were marshalled

- the inspiration of Scripture by the Holy Spirit
- the sufficiency of Scripture; that no other authority is equal
- British Evangelicals emphasized the infallibility of Scripture. It could not fail in the great purposes for which it was given.
- While in the United States inerrancy became a key word.

All of these had a history in previous eras of the church, but they became our key concepts

- We battled over these
- At times with one another.

And what we need from this conference is a united stance around our core beliefs about scripture, because

THERE IS STILL VITAL ACTION to be taken on the old frontier.

- Christianity is a history based faith, or it is groundless
- If the great saving events of Scripture did not happen - We have believed in vain.

Above all this applies to the resurrection of Christ, listen to St. Paul in 1Cor. 15

12 But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.

14 And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

15 More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised.

16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either.

17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.

18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.

19 If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

- Reverent biblical and historical scholarship remains essential to our cause. So thank God for Tyndale House and all other places like it!

The essential basis of Evangelical unity at the old frontier is this

The complete truthfulness, trustworthiness and sufficiency of Scripture for everything for which it was given, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

At the centre of which is salvation through Jesus Christ.
The boundaries of that we may debate, but there we need to stand united.

David will be speaking later about the purposes for which Scripture is given, but, I need to move on, because the battle has moved on.

To illustrate from the 2nd world war, REMEMBER THE MAGINOT LINE!

Determined to learn from the First World War the French created a huge defensive line.
Defensive forces were massed.

But the enemy came another way!

In the same way the Battle for scriptural truth is now on

The New Front Line

What we face is not so much a direct assault on the truth of the Bible, but

A direct assault on the received concept of truth

As Peter Hicks sums it up

- ‘The 20th century has seen the collapse of the traditional concept of truth.’ Peter Hicks

The key issues of the Postmodern Challenge are these

- Language is seen as indeterminate
- (So All really is interpretation)
- Truth is a cultural construct. It is not discovered it is constructed
Truth is fluid what we are believing for now (At best)
- Truth claims are power plays, a form of oppression at worst.
- And, if this is the nature of language and of truth, then
Relativism is self evident

We need to address these in turn.

Language is indeterminate?

Hear the American philosopher Richard Rorty

‘We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there. To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations. The suggestion that truth, as well as the world, is out there is a legacy of an age in which the world was seen as the creation of a being who had a language of his own.’

There lies the clue. 'the world was seen as the creation of a being who had a language of his own'. Christians still see the world that way.

Language has meaning because we are created by a communicating God.

The philosopher Nietzsche is the intellectual godfather of this whole way of thinking. He once wrote 'I fear we shall never be rid of God, so long as we still believe in grammar.'

To which more recently the Jewish philosopher George Steiner replied

'Grammar lives because there is the wager on God.'

Human language has meaning because the creator exists and communicates.

If we believe that, we cannot claim that

Everything is interpretation

If there were no God, or if God did not communicate, we might agree with Jaques Derrida that 'There is nothing outside the text' Derrida

But there is someone who gave us the ability to create texts. The existence of a God who gives his human creatures the gift of meaningful language sets limits to the possible range of interpretation – whether of scripture or any other text.

So is truth a construct rather than a discovery?

To an extent, Yes. The search for meaning lies at the heart of what it means to be human. Fallen humans, made in God's image, have always sought the meaning of their lives and constructed the best philosophies or theologies they could.

But now we live in a day which has lost its belief in revealed truth or even in objective truth. This reduces us to truth creation by pick and mix. The singer Richard Ashcroft said

'I think there are millions of us on this planet, going through life with no fixed religion, no fixed philosophy, but gathering bits of books, bits of other people's discoveries over the centuries and putting them together with their own lives and forming a new religion, a new philosophy. It isn't a religious thing or a God thing -- it's a personal thing, a personal quest to find enlightenment in me.'

That sort of truth IS fluid. It is truth for now, truth while it suits me. Surfing on the current fashion of truth until a more attractive wave overtakes me.

You will have noticed the subtle transition from quoting philosophers to quoting pop stars. Many people share these views, simply because they seem to be real to life, to be common sense.

Philosophy and popular culture combine to make postmodernism seem obvious:

Especially to those who have never heard of postmodernism!

If you are continually bombarded with conflicting messages, how can you decide which seem true?

(U2 VIDEO CLIP)

In an age of communication overload, objective truth quickly becomes a casualty. A professor of psychology wrote

It once seemed easy enough to distinguish between truth and falsity, objectivity and subjectivity, good reasons and bad, and even morality and immorality. Yet, those days have largely vanished, as television, radio, books, newspapers, e-mail and passing acquaintances inundate us with differences in perspective, values, and understandings. In what particular words can we place our trust when confronted with infinite variations in the real and the good?' Kenneth Gergen

In such a world 'The truth' becomes 'my truth' or 'your truth'.

People are rarely relativist in practice, but they find it increasingly hard to justify truth claims as more than personal choices, or something that allegedly 'everybody knows'.

In fact it is those who are most sure that their truth is The Truth who are the objects of the greatest suspicion. Because,

Truth Claims are Power plays ? aren't they?

'All thought that pretends to discover truth is but an expression of the will to power - even to domination - of those making the truth claims over those who are being addressed by them.' Jon Snyder

'I believe this is true' becomes 'I want power over you by getting you to accept my truth as the truth.' If this were the case even evangelism would be an oppression.

But truth cannot be reduced to power. To quote Anthony Thiselton

'Christian theology cannot be compatible with a transvaluation of questions about truth into questions about value or power as an ultimate principle.'

but

'A Christian account of human nature accepts the capacity of the self for self-deception and its readiness to use strategies of manipulation.'

In one sense the new front line has a far better understanding of sin than the old front line.

Of course I know that postmoderns don't really believe in sin. But they do know that humans abuse truth.

To sum up:

Postmodernism says -

Truth cannot really be known.

It is either a distortion or a construct.

At best it is fluid, good enough for now, but always up for grabs.

Christianity says -

We are created for truth,

But we run from it!

Here is the Good News on the New Front Line

We are Made in the image of God

- Made Like God for a relationship with God
- A speaking and listening God creates speaking and listening people
- Our words responding to God's words

Here is the Bad News on the New Front Line

We are a fallen race - Evading truth , running from it or distorting it.

We have 'Exchanged the truth about God for a lie.'

We have 'Loved darkness rather than light.'

And 'If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.'

But there is one thing needed more than a better Christian philosophy of knowledge.

It is the promise of redemption.

What postmoderns need most is not a better theory of truth, but to be set free from the power of sin, which makes us run from the truth.

Postmoderns need Scripture, because Scripture reveals Christ, 'The Truth' who says

'You will know the truth and the truth will make you free.

for 'If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.'

+Graham Cray - Sept. 2003

Truth and Sufficiency: The Bible in a Postmodern Age

In my first section I pointed out a vital distinction between:-

Our defense of Scripture - on today's cultural front line - and

The central theological reasons why we recognize and submit to God's authority through Scripture.

Now it is time to rehearse those reasons and to address Truth from the Centre

CHRIST IS THE CENTRE of Scripture, to quote Francis Watson

'The writings of both Testaments converge on the figure of Jesus and on the triune divine identity disclosed in Jesus, and this convergence is the basis of their authority and trustworthiness.'

As soon as we approach Christ as 'the Truth from the Centre' we discover an unavoidable interdependence between Christ himself - the Incarnate word of God - and Scripture the written word of God.

You cannot have one without the other.

If the argument is necessarily circular, it is not so much a closed circle as

AN OPEN CIRCLE

'Scripture, when rightly interpreted leads to Christ; Christ can be properly known only through Scripture.'

Alister McGrath

Each opens up the other.

The more I am attracted to Christ, the more I turn to Scripture. The more I study Scripture, the more I discover Christ.

And this is necessarily so because

ULTIMATELY NO EXTERNAL CRITERION CAN VALIDATE SCRIPTURE

Lesslie Newbigin, commenting on the prologue to John's Gospel, described the challenge of the evangelist.

You have to start with some common ground. Some basis in culture from which Christ can be preached. But Christ is the basis on which all cultures are judged. 'In the beginning was the Word'.

Christ is - 'The primal truth by which all else has to be confronted and questioned. ... That which in the end must be accepted as the beginning of all explanations.' Truth from the Centre

On the old front line Enlightenment rationality or reason was treated as the ultimate judge. But as John Webster says

'God is not summoned into the presence of reason: reason is summoned before the presence of God...'

How is that presence encountered? ... The revelatory presence of God is set forth in Holy Scripture.'

John Webster

Does this mean that the Christian case for Scriptural authority is based on some form of special pleading?

Only if we believe that fallen human reason acts as a sort of accessible spectators gallery, which provides a detached 50/50 vision of what is true.

But hardly anybody holds that view of reason any more.

We now know that all truth is received through faith

For once the postmoderns and the pre moderns agree.

'I believe in order to understand' (Anselm, Augustine Etc)

In one sense truth is perspectival

There is no spectators gallery, no view from nowhere.

It is belief from where we stand, and it is acted on by faith.

But then many postmoderns make a leap and say 'all truth is therefore relative'

But the logic does not follow.

This is not relativism.

It does not deny revelation.

Revelation does not depend on where we stand. it depends upon God's willingness to give it, and our capacity to receive it!

All truths may be perspectival, but all perspectives do not grant an equal view.

As a vicar in York I could either stand outside my parish church and see a cathedral, a hotel and part of a city wall, or I could climb to the top of the cathedral tower, and see half way to Hull!

So find the perspective which gives the best view.

Find the best place to stand!

And that takes you to Scripture

'Scripture is the place to stand when one wants to be in God's presence and learn of Him. Through the Bible we can orient ourselves to the objective revelation that has been given, and through the Spirit enter into it personally and dynamically.' Clark Pinnock

Think with me for a moment about how you came to faith.

At a key moment in the process

- Christ was preached perhaps through a personal testimony, but whether the Bible was quoted or not, Christ was preached
- According to Scripture

As a result

- You came to faith in Christ

You began to grow in your faith,

- And started to trust Scripture

As Scripture became central to your faith in Christ

- You learned the arguments for trust in Scripture

Few of us come to faith on the basis of believing an apologetic about scripture.

We are more likely to come to trust Scripture through conversion to Christ.

So many of us learned the classic argument

- Christ is our Lord - our authority
- He lived under the authority of OT Scripture
- His view of Scripture should be ours
- He commissioned his apostles
- He promised them the Spirit

There is a simple outline of the classical Evangelical argument for trust in the authority and inspiration of Old and New testaments, with Christ as key to both.

It is a perfectly reasonable argument, but there is more to say.

For a moment let us explore the relationship between Christ and Scripture.

His incarnate life was formed by OT scripture

He was obedient to its commands

Both when tempted by the Devil and in his disputes with Pharisees or Sadducees he quotes it as his authority

But above all he is shaped by its story

Israel's story becomes his story. God's purposes through Israel become his purposes.

En-route to Jerusalem he says

'I must be on my way for it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Lk.13:33

His cleansing of the temple re-enacts the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians, as he echoes Jeremiah's prediction of that event, and continually reapplies Scripture to his own calling.

The Old Testament Scriptures shape his life and ministry.

He is not only shaped by Old Testament Scripture he fulfilled OT Scripture

You know his words

Teaching on the mountain 'I have come to fulfil the law and the prophets' Mt. 5:17

As they arrest him 'Let the Scriptures be fulfilled.' Mk 14:49

On the road to Emmaus

'He interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures' Lk. 24:27

Listen to the story

25 He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!

26 Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?"

27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

28 As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going further.

29 But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.
31 Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight.
32 They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"
33 They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together
34 and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon."
35 Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread.
36 ¶ While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."
37 They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.
38 He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?
39 Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."
40 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet.
41 And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?"
42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish,
43 and he took it and ate it in their presence.
44 He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."
45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.
46 He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day,
47 and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.
48 You are witnesses of these things.
49 I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

He said 'Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.' Each of the three sections of the hebrew Old Testament

And, finally, in John 'These are the Scriptures that talk about me.' Jn. 5:39

He was the fulfillment, because otherwise the

Old Testament was a story without an ending?

Prophecies, dashed hopes, styles and traditions hanging loosely like a set of bare wires, all brought together in Jesus.

Tom Wright put it this way

'When Paul declares that the Messiah died for our sins according to the Scriptures ... he means that the entire scriptural story, the great drama of God's dealing with Israel, came together when the young Jew from Nazareth was nailed up by the Romans and left to die.'

When the entire scriptural story came together - the New testament was created.

Jesus Creates New Testament Scripture

The New Testament is the Old Testament fulfilled in Christ

‘As Jesus cannot be understood apart from Jewish Scripture; Jewish Scripture cannot be understood apart from Jesus.’ R.W.Moberley

In fulfilling the Old Testament Scriptures he provided the model for the New Testament writers

The authority of the New Testament lies not just in Christ's commission to the apostles and his promise of the Spirit to remind and guide into truth.

It was his example in fulfilling the Scriptures which gave them the key to interpreting the Scriptures as they wrote.

‘It was the conviction that God’s purposes had been and were being fulfilled in Messiah Jesus that gave Paul the hermeneutical clue to read and understand the Scriptures.’ James Dunn

The same can be said of Matthew, of the writer of Hebrews, and the rest.

So Christ is indeed

THE KEY TO ALL SCRIPTURE

‘Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things .’ Heb.1:1-2

+Graham Cray - September 2003