

## **00 God's Big Picture?**

A response to Vaughan Roberts's book, *God's Big Picture* (2009 edition).

*(In all quotes from the book, the emphasis is mine.)*

Roberts starts by showing how the Bible is the supreme authority for all matters of faith and doctrine.

*"The Holy Spirit revealed to them [the early apostles] **all the truth** about Christ so that they could teach **the full significance of his salvation and its implications.**" (p15)*

He presumably can't mean **all** the truth about Jesus <full stop>. Jesus is God, so we could spend a whole lifetime and never come close to knowing **all** the truth about Christ. So I can only assume that he means 'enough truth about Jesus to be able to understand salvation'. Then again, after studying the cross and its meaning all these months, I couldn't say that I've even begun to understand its full significance and implications.

*"They [the NT writers] were convinced that their teaching was the very **Word of God**" (p16)*

Personally, I don't read that degree of certainty into the quoted biblical passages – though I accept that this is a matter of interpretation. But I thought that only Jesus was **the** Word of God.

*"But God ensured by his Spirit that everything they wrote was **exactly** what he wanted them to write. Just as the Lord Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, so **the Bible is both a human and a divine book.**" (p17)*

Roberts is saying that the Bible was dictated **exactly** by God; indeed, that the Bible is a **divine book**. That's quite a claim. But then, as he admits elsewhere (re the 'talking snake' of Genesis) the truth of the Bible is sometimes metaphoric, sometimes literal, so to understand this divine book, we humans have to decide how to interpret it.

*"The Bible covers a great deal of ground. But there is **one supreme subject** that binds it all together: **Jesus Christ and the salvation God offers through him.**" (p17)*

This sounds like two subjects: Jesus and salvation, but...

*"The Bible must be read and understood as one book with one ultimate author, God, and **one ultimate subject**, God's **plan of salvation** through his son, Jesus." (p21)*

So the Bible's **one ultimate subject** is to tell us about the **plan of salvation** – the means by which we are saved.

*"Scholars have debated for years whether or not it is possible to point to a unifying theme that binds the whole Bible together ... Any unifying theme that is used to help us to see how the Bible fits together must arise out of Scripture itself, rather than being imposed upon it; and it must be broad enough to allow each part to make its own distinct contribution. The theme of the **kingdom of God** satisfies both requirements." (p21)*

This is where he introduces his definition, which forms the backbone of the whole book: “*The kingdom of God: God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule and blessing*”. (p22) This sounds to me like: if we obey God, he will bless us. That doesn’t sound like a relationship, rather a king ruling his subjects, but I accept that he does say...

“*God longs for human beings to enjoy an **intimate relationship** with him in his presence. As he is a perfect, holy God, that is **possible only as we submit** to his loving rule and **do not sin**.” (p22)*

“*In the garden of Eden we see the world as God designed it to be. God’s people, Adam and Eve, live in God’s place, the garden, under his rule as they **submit to his word**.” (p24)*

I’m not sure what he means by ‘submit to his word’, but it sounds as if Roberts’s view of the kingdom is that God’s rule tells us what’s right and wrong, and as he’s God, he knows what really is right and wrong, and so, by obeying God, we receive blessing.

This sounds attractive, but I can see a flaw: exactly who decides what God’s rule really is? Who decides what’s right and wrong? Answer: the divine Bible tells us. OK, but the Bible has to be interpreted, and that’s what we fallible humans (church leaders?) have to do. That means, effectively, that it’s the church that sets out what is sin and what isn’t. Dangerous! This sounds remarkably similar to the situation in Jesus’ time, with the Scribes and Pharisees.

“*Sadly, Adam and Eve think life would be better if they lived independently of God. ... They turn away from him and he responds by **turning away from them**.” (p24) They are “*banished from the garden*” (p41) and he also says they are “*evicted*” (p116). Really?! Is that how a loving God responds to us when we sin?*

That sounds very **unlike** the God I’ve come to know these past two years. Throughout the Old Testament, God keeps on loving, and **keeps** on loving, and keeps on **turning back** to his people, despite their sin and their refusal to accept his rule. That is the God I’ve come to know and love, not one who **turns away** from us when we sin.

But then here is a faint echo of the glorious truths that I’ve been revelling in these past nine months in my writings...

“*He had the power to put everything right again, and he chose **a very surprising way** of doing it: by dying in **weakness on a cross**. It was by his death that Jesus dealt with the problem of sin and made it possible for human beings to come back into relationship with his Father.*” (p26)

It’s this dying, aching love for us, this enemy love, that has transformed my life, but sadly its depth and meaning are unexplored here. The cross is simply the means by which God’s wrath is satisfied, so that I can be forgiven for my sins.

So far, I have only commented on the book’s Introduction, i.e pages 1–26. I have read chapters 1 to 8, plus the Epilogue, but from that, I only have a couple of comments that are not covered by what I’ve already said:

*“If we are wise we shall follow their example [the worshippers in Revelation] and worship God here on earth. There will be times when that is **inconvenient** and might cause us **hardship**, but it is worth it.”* (p149)

(Have I’ve misunderstood this? Could it *ever* be a hardship or inconvenience to worship God?)

*“The Bible is a relational book, which the Holy Spirit uses to help us grow in the knowledge and love of God through Jesus Christ.”* (p164) Of Old Testament passages he says, *“it will **also** have something distinctive to say about God and our relationship with him.”* (p165) and *“**also** call on us to look up to God and consider our relationship with him.”*

I feel that these quotes make it sound as if relationship and worship are secondary to the mechanism of salvation.

So, overall, Roberts’s view is very different from my own. He has made it very clear that, to him, the Bible is primarily there to give us the **plan of salvation**. And since that plan involves our turning away from sin, and instead living under God’s rule, then the Bible’s secondary purpose must be to inform us what *is* sin and what is *not* sin, and we have to interpret Scripture to decide.

But I have come to believe that the Bible is there, rather, to show us what God is like: from beginning to end, it shows us that God is love; God **IS** loving relationship, the Trinity. And God invites us into that loving relationship, but says that, if we don’t come into that relationship, then things will all go horribly wrong. Sin (singular) is trying to live outside of that relationship, and sins (plural) are the inevitable consequence of our trying to live outside of God’s love.

To me, God’s judgement is not active punishment, as Roberts portrays; hell is not where God *sends* us; we are not evicted or banished from Eden. Rather, judgement/hell is the inevitable consequence of our choices in rejecting God’s constant, longing, yearning, dying love (enemy love) for us. I read the Bible as saying that God *never, ever* turns his back on us! He loves us to the very end, as Jesus has shown us.

But yes, Jesus definitely died ‘for our sins’; and yes, without Jesus’ death and resurrection (both literal, historical events) we have nothing to preach and you have nothing to believe (1 Cor 15), but, as far as I can see, the exact mechanism of salvation is irrelevant. Indeed, the Bible describes salvation using a huge range of different metaphors to help us appreciate its depth and wonder.

If the exact mechanism were important then (a) it would have been made clearer in the Bible rather than our having to read it into our own interpretation of various passages, and (b) it would have been seen more clearly in church history. I don’t know of any historical evidence for the church espousing any kind of substitution idea (the central theme of this book) until the Reformation in the 16th century; the nearest is Anselm’s writings about penal satisfaction (not substitution) in the 11th century. So the church grew and spread and flourished for a minimum of a thousand years without specifying a mechanism for salvation.

Ironically, once again, as he did near the beginning of the book (p17), Roberts quotes John 5 about “*the Pharisees who diligently studied the Scriptures and yet refused to come to Jesus to have life*” (p166). Truly Roberts has been very diligent; he’s done a huge amount of work producing this amazing pattern of propositions and diagrams, showing how the one idea of the kingdom of God as ‘God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule and blessing’ runs through eight stages from Genesis to Revelation. And I’m sure that Roberts is not actually refusing to come to Jesus, but I feel he is missing the whole point of Jesus’ teaching. So what does Jesus mean by ‘come to me to have life’? It’s in John 17:3: “*Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*”

My life has been totally transformed, in an almost Saul-to-Paul way, because I’ve discovered that the whole of the Bible is about relationship, from beginning to end. Primarily it’s God’s relationship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and then how we are invited into that relationship, as Jesus’ death and resurrection makes that possible. Then it’s about how we grow in that relationship and how we extend that relationship to anyone and everyone we meet. Indeed, entering those loving relationships, with God and with one another, is the sole purpose of our lives. Yes, Jesus came to give us his salvation, wholeness, shalom: *I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*, and that life comes, centrally, through the cross of Christ, the ultimate example of loving relationship and all that it means, but to see this glorious life reduced to a mechanism, to a formula, makes me very sad indeed.

*Paul Bev. 19.5.19*