

0 Full Circle

Thoughts on a 50-year spiritual journey

Looking back over the years, I have observed a number of seasons within my Christian life, which started in student days in Cambridge in the late 1960s. What follows is somewhat oversimplified, but I have found it helpful, personally, to review my 50-year journey. It's probably a bit of a self-caricature too, but caricature can sometimes be used to good effect, so please bear with me.

Entering Cambridge as a student in 1968, I went to the 'Freshers' Sermon', where someone explained what Jesus had done in dying on the cross for me, and how I could receive Jesus into my heart; I did so, willingly and gladly. Thus began my first dozen years as a Christian in which I followed the conservative evangelical expression of faith and, along with others in the CU, I sought to persuade the new-fangled 'charismatics' that (certain of) the gifts of the Spirit were for the early church only.

Then I experienced some of these gifts, including healings, and realised that maybe I'd been wrong. There followed another dozen years in which I tried to persuade conservatives that they were missing out – if people can see miracles, then surely they'll come to faith, or so I thought.

I then woke up to the fact that I'd spent a lot of time trying to persuade other Christians, so there followed another period of roughly 12 years in which I sought to persuade non-Christians that they were wrong. And I believe I was successful in helping a number of people on their way to faith in Jesus.

The next period, however, was one of dissatisfaction with my own church. (Have you picked up on the pattern yet – my deep concern for other people's shortcomings?!) But I was still concerned to reach outsiders, and I still felt that if the church demonstrated a few more miracles, others would come to believe. A chap came to our church – let's call him Harry – who had remarkable prophetic and healing gifts, but my church wouldn't recognise that God was so clearly (I thought) working through him.

I met with Harry in a small Bible study group over a number of years but gradually his teaching got more and more off-beam, such that we, in his tiny group, were the only people who knew the truth – the true truth – and all the rest were 'of the enemy', including those in my own church, and that these people were trying to push us off the path of truth. Worse still, I no longer really cared about outsiders because I was totally focussed on making sure that I didn't lose my own salvation. (I still can't fathom how I managed to get into that position!)

Thankfully, I suddenly woke up and thought, "What the hell am I doing?!", and I immediately stopped meeting with Harry. But then I had to work out: "Well, what *do* I believe? Does God exist even? Maybe it's all a delusion – just wishful thinking."

But I decided that the world didn't make sense without a creator, so for the next few years I struggled to regain my faith. The trouble was that my original unhappiness with my own church – indeed with churches in general – continued. Where could I find an expression of faith that I could really relate to?

Thankfully, while I had been off on my 'spiritual walk-about', my wife, Sue, had been pushing the bounds of her own faith, partly through a two-year, part-time diocesan course that introduced her to a breadth of spirituality. This excited her and enlivened her faith. In particular, she got away from a purely word-based faith, and realised the value of a more contemplative approach; and some of this then rubbed off on me.

Anyway, I continued my search, made some progress, and began to feel that I was getting back on track. At that stage, I think I expressed it as saying I had 'regained my faith'.

Then, in spring 2017, we decided it was time to leave the church we had been part of for 37 years, and look for fellowship in the 'village' (suburb) to which we had moved 18 months earlier. We looked around Taverham, but as

soon as we attended St Edmund's, we knew that this was the place for us. It has people from a wide range of churchmanships, but regardless of our form of belief, we all know we belong at St Ed's!

Then a friend from my old church recommended a book, and I found that it set out in theological terms *exactly* what I had been feeling about my own faith, both the negative aspects and the "shouldn't it be more like this?" aspects. I had only reached the third paragraph, when I almost shouted, "Yes, that's *exactly* what I've been thinking and feeling for years!" but then I realised that this was just the foreword by a different author; I hadn't even started the main part of the book!

From that and from other books since then, I've found relationship, community and belonging, and alongside that, a sense of wonder, a love of silence – just being with God. I certainly wouldn't say that I've 'found the truth', but I know that this is the only place in the world where I want to be right now, and I'm longing to grow closer to God as I travel this path.

Then I remembered! My spiritual journey did *not* start at Cambridge. A friend from school had suggested we spend a week at a place in Yorkshire called Scargill House, a Christian community and retreat centre, and it was amazing! Coming from a very dysfunctional family, I was bowled over by the love and acceptance I experienced, and that was it, I believed. And, in a sense, I had fallen in love with God.

As I thought back about this, I remembered that the speaker was an 85-year-old gentleman called Jack Winslow, then described as a Christian mystic, and in the weeks that followed, I used to get up early, sit in my freezing cold bedroom wrapped in an eiderdown (remember them?!) trying to meditate.

When I got to Cambridge, I was given the intellectual framework, so that I could really *know* the truth. I am grateful for that – in a way – but it has taken me fifty years to bring it all together and come Full Circle into God's Amazing Love.

And this is just the beginning! I have found a new expression of faith; it's still a biblical faith but I no longer feel the need to apologise for it, and I no longer need to persuade anyone of anything. They are loved and accepted by God, and they are loved and accepted by me. And I shall try to live the rest of my life (I've already had my 'three score years and ten!') expressing these truths in the best way that I can, and if necessary, I'll use words.

Paul Bev. mid 2017

1 Rebuilding my faith

This past two years have been the most exciting of my whole Christian life. Why? Well, I've shared with many of you [see article 0 above] how, several years ago, I ended up in what was effectively a Christian sect, and then how, when I pulled out, I even questioned whether God existed – I then tried to rebuild my faith.

Having moved out to Taverham (7 miles from our city-centre church of 37 years' attendance), two years ago we felt it was time to stop being 'commuter Christians' and maybe find fellowship locally (as we would probably eventually have to do anyway, with advancing years).

We found that the local Anglican church was small but incredibly welcoming, and we noticed that the church contained a lot of people who had been through (or were going through) very difficult relationship problems and/or were suffering in a variety of other ways. We noticed too that the church laid huge stress on pastoral care. (You'll see the relevance of that in a minute.)

So, let's get rebuilding... At about the same time as joining St Ed's, I started reading more widely, and one book in particular struck me very powerfully. It seemed to be echoing the exact unhappinesses I had long felt about my own faith: it should be more about developing a relationship with a person, and less about determining which beliefs are right or wrong.

In the 'new' model that this book proposed, God was effectively saying, "Yes, of course you want a relationship: you were created to be in relationship with me! I AM relationship: Father, Son and Holy Spirit – come and join us!" The joy I felt in that discovery was just wonderful, and I have shared that with some of you already.

However, I shared the book with a theologically trained friend, because I realised that the teaching was somewhat radical by some Evangelical standards. This friend read the book and gave it as his opinion that the author "has rejected 30% of the Bible".

Now I'm not theologically trained, but I **am** highly motivated by the joy I have experienced, so I started reading what some other theologians had written.

No, I haven't come up with 'the answer'; I still think there are lots of discussions to be had, but here I want to share my progress(?), and hope that we can share our thoughts together, and maybe make some progress in making the Gospel accessible to our friends and families.

First, what's non-negotiable for me?

- 1) The central problem is human sin – broken relationships.
- 2) Our loving God has a plan to sort that problem.
- 3) The solution (salvation) centres on the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.
- 4) We need to respond in order to appropriate that salvation.

Hopefully this is unarguable, but the big issue, of course, is "What do you mean by salvation?" But note that I didn't just say that "salvation centres on the death of Jesus" or even "the death and resurrection of Jesus".

Let me start by framing the problem in a (partly hypothetical) story.

Martha is a superb welcomer; she's a "do anything for anyone" sort of person, but she was beating herself up because her church had told her that she had to "share the Gospel" with x-number of her non-Christian friends, and she doesn't feel she could do that; indeed, she wasn't sure she wanted to do that.

"Why ever not?!" I asked, but then, "Oh, hang on, what do you mean by 'share the Gospel'?"

Well, here's what I've always been taught as 'sharing the Gospel'. You have to tell them:

(1) God is pure and sinless (2) I am not – far from it! (3) I therefore can't get to heaven; indeed, I deserve to die for my sin (4) God is love, so he sent Jesus (5) Jesus died in my place, as a substitute, to take the penalty that I deserve (6) Because of this exchange, I am FREE and can go to heaven (7) Are you ready to accept Jesus into your life now? (And we might add (8) If you don't accept what I'm saying, you'll go to hell.)

"That's all very well", says Martha, "but my friend Jenny was abused as a child, and her husband had various affairs and eventually left her for another woman. So that won't sound like 'good news' to her! What kind of God would say to Jenny, 'The main problem is that you're completely sinful.' – What does this 'good news' say to her in her suffering?!"

Do you see the problem?! Martha's trying to tell Jenny that God loves her, but her 'sharing the Gospel' could so easily be misunderstood as a wrathful, judgemental God punishing his own son to provide a legal loophole so that God doesn't have to kill **us** for **our** sin.

And how many of your friends have suffered broken relationships? And add to that those who have suffered through illness – how does this version of the Gospel speak into their situation?

So does God actually WANT people to come to know his love? Of course he does!! Then you and I need to do some serious thinking about how we communicate that love in the 21st century (in whatever cultural environment we find ourselves).

From my theological investigations, I learn that my (1)–(8) presentation is given the technical term ‘penal substitution’, and this past year it has been the focus of a lot of my questioning. And looking back, I see that it was a theological requirement for my previous church’s specification for their new minister: the new incumbent must be someone who ‘keeps the penal substitutionary death of Christ and his resurrection at the centre of his/her theology and ministry’. (As a PCC member I passed this specification without having a clue what penal substitution was.)

Now, I haven’t rejected penal substitution outright, but I do think it’s really not the most helpful metaphor to use, for the society I live in. For that’s what it is, a metaphor; if we’re using words to say what God is like and what God has done then we have to use metaphors – “It’s like this...”

My theological diggings have been exciting because I’ve discovered the huge range of metaphors that the Bible (and contemporary Christians through the centuries) have used for explaining what God has done in and through Christ: reconciliation, redemption, acceptance, forgiveness, defeating evil, satisfaction for sins, restoration, rebirth – it’s a huge and glorious kaleidoscope that I’m revelling in exploring!

The problem is that I’ve always been taught that my (1)–(8) is ‘the truth’ and that I have to defend it against people who will try to water it down and even deny it. “Hold on to the truth!” I was told when I was a student in Cambridge. But in my sect, I thought that we were the last and final people who were holding onto the one true truth. Stupid of me, I know, but I think God was trying to teach me to always be willing to question “what I’ve always been taught”.

So, where do we go from here? You may feel that my questioning of penal substitution is tantamount to rejecting 30% of the Bible, in which case we have to just agree to differ and each serve God in the way that we feel we can.

If you’re willing to join me in my questioning, let’s talk about it and see if we can’t, together, help Martha to help Jenny; and you can multiply that up, over and over, including my own family!

I have more thoughts on this that I could share, and I’ll write them up for my own benefit (I find I think best by committing my thoughts to words on a screen), but if you want to share in my exploration, please let me know.

Gosh, have you really read right through to here?! Well done! :-)

Paul Bev. Aug 2018

2 What did Jesus do?

What I have written here is my interpretation of the theological books I’ve read. I’m not a theologian, so I’ve probably (undoubtedly) got bits of it wrong, so please bear with me because its import has transformed my whole view of life, and I hope it might be of help to others who are desperately struggling, as I was, to build a credible faith in a loving God, a faith that I can happily share with my friends and families.

As I explained yesterday, the chief model that the church uses to ‘share the Gospel’ is penal substitution, and I’ve come to believe that our whole church is run under its influence. This model was formulated several hundred years after the church began, and it is based on the framework of justice that prevails in the Western world. Ironically, it wouldn’t have been a very good model to use in the time of the early church because, for the Jews, the law was covenantal and relational – it was more about the relationship between God and his people than about the individual and their moral failure.

But the problem today seems to be that we’re actually viewing the biblical texts through the lens of penal substitution (retributive justice), and while I’m not saying that penal substitution is wrong, as such, I do believe that, because it is so dominant, it colours our interpretation of the scriptures.

Anyway, to be positive, I’ve already written about how my life has been changed by seeing that God IS relationship – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – but the penny-drop moment that came to me this morning was that **sin is not primarily a moral problem but a relational problem.**

Remember the woman caught in adultery? The religious people saw it as a moral problem: this individual has sinned; she deserves to die! How did Jesus view her? He loved her. He could see that her sinning was damaging her and the people around her (sin is its own punishment). “Woman, where are they? Has no-one condemned you? ... Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.”

And what about the prodigal father? (I use that word advisedly: the OED says ‘Prodigal – Having or giving something on a lavish scale’.) ITV’s Judge Rinder would certainly have found in favour of the elder brother, but again, God’s love is about relationship, not about ‘rights’. I even think that Judge Rinder would have accused the father of attempting to pervert the course of justice.

But when we sin, is God somehow **forced** to reject us because he is holy? No! His first instinct is to forgive, not to condemn. God’s into **restorative justice**, not retributive justice.

As one author said, “We have an image of God as someone who condemns. And we do our best to imitate him.” Ouch! Am I really a ‘younger brother’ or am I, in truth, more like the elder brother?!

Again, when we sin, is God somehow forced to reject us because he is holy? No! He is God; he can do as he wishes, and who can argue; he wants to restore us, not to condemn us. We must NOT try to tell God what he can and can’t do, just because it gives us a neat, packaged way to ‘share the Gospel’. (Sorry if I’m becoming intemperate, but I feel passionate about this!)

So, what about our friends and families? In what I wrote yesterday, I said that they know that the best thing in life is loving relationships, and the worst thing in life is when those relationships go wrong. They may not be able to relate to sin as moral failure, but they sure as hell can relate to sin as relationship breakdown.

Three times in the past 2/3 months a couple who live down the alleyway opposite us, and park their car in the layby, have had a screaming, shouting, crying battle outside our house. **They** can relate to the need for reconciliation and restoration, and if God exists, might he not be able to offer them some help?!

We don’t need to give people a course in theology to help them understand sin – they already KNOW what it is – betrayal, hatred, prejudice – relationship HELL. And that’s what Jesus came to do – to restore broken relationships. That’s what our friends and family can relate to right now, without explaining about a holy God not being able to tolerate sin, etc.

That’s why the church I now attend is so wonderful: everyone is accepted as they are, unconditionally. If someone wants their baby to be baptised on a Monday afternoon, the vicar agrees to it. Sure, he explains about how baptism is about relationship with the God who loves them, and that the church is where people get together to share that relationship, but he doesn’t preach at them and he doesn’t tell them that they have to attend church to qualify. Ditto when they want to be married in our lovely medieval church.

In very stark contrast, a friend recently went to a family funeral the other end of the country where the vicar saw it as an ideal opportunity to explain to the mourners how they can avoid going to hell if they accept what Jesus has done for them on the cross. Words fail me!

Well, that’s it, really. I now read my Bible (Old **and** New Testament) with a ‘relationship’ view rather than a ‘propositional and transactional’ view, and it’s a very wonderful! OK, there are some difficult bits I have to wrestle with – it’s not all easy answers and sweetness and light – but it’s been transformational for me, and I now WANT to share (this) Gospel with anyone and everyone.

Thanks for listening, and if you’re willing, let’s talk about it and see what we can learn together.

Paul Bev, August 2018

3 How do I/we relate to the OT?

My next challenge was to take an honest look at the Old Testament – dangerous, I know, but they do say that “honesty is the best policy”.

The OT clearly contains some wonderful and inspirational passages, which we use in our worship: it speaks about a loving and forgiving and tolerant God who wants to restore his people to a loving relationship with him – great! But it also, in some parts, seems to talk about a less savoury God who urges his people to do things which, today, we’d probably class as ethnic cleansing, even genocide. So how are we going to deal with these?

Option 1: Pick out the nice bits, enjoy and propagate those, and **ignore** the nasty bits. If I’m honest, this is what I’ve done for my first 50 years as a Christian.

Option 2: Try to actually **justify** the bits about killing all the men, women and children. We might argue that God told them to do it, so it must be right; it was justifiable because otherwise those worshippers of other gods would have perverted the purity of the Israelites’ religion and worship.

Sorry but I don’t like Option 2, either. That sort of attitude has led some people to do some unspeakable things in the name of Christianity over the centuries, things of which those who oppose our faith quite rightly say, “Well, if that’s what Christianity is like, I don’t want to know.” and “There’s more evil done in the name of religion...” I’m sure you’ve heard that sort of thing more than once.

OK, let’s try a radically different approach. I’ve spent years using the Bible to try to work out what’s right and what’s wrong. That eventually led me into that tiny sect where we were the only ones who were right, and all those around us were trying to pull us off the true path. Stupid, I know, but I believe God let me make that mistake to make a point:

Jesus did **not** come to teach us what’s right and what’s wrong, and worse still **who** is right and **who** is wrong, who is in and who is out.

So, if we’re followers of Jesus, is there anything we can learn from his attitude to the Scriptures, i.e. to the Old Testament. Well, let’s start by asking, what were Jesus’ main priorities in life? And then we’ll look at how that related to his attitude to the OT.

I’d like to suggest that Jesus had two main priorities. In the short term, he just didn’t seem to be able to stop himself caring for the poor, the marginalised, the outcasts – he loved them and they loved him! (By contrast, he also didn’t seem to be able to stop himself getting up the noses of the religious elite, whose concerns about “what is right” were in large measure the cause of the marginalisation of others.)

Jesus’ longer-term priority was his determination to do something about the way our relations with one another and with God were being ruined, and he knew that through his willingly succumbing to death on a cross, and thence to resurrection and ascension, he could offer us freedom, reconciliation, redemption, victory, healing, restoration, forgiveness, communion, acceptance, belonging, value, worth, inspiration, and a model of sacrificial love... I could go on (and, as Sue says, I frequently do!). These are some of the wonderful things I’ve been revelling in this past couple of years, all flowing out of Jesus’ willingness to die for us, but annoyingly I’ll have to stop, as that’s not the focus of my thinking here. (Back to the Old Testament...)

So, if those were Jesus’ priorities, did they flow out of his study of the OT? (Remember the time that he spent in the temple as a child, talking to the Bible teachers? I’d love to have listened in to those conversations!)

Well, what did Jesus have to say about the Law and the Prophets? *“I did not come to abolish them, but to fulfil them.”* Yes, but what does that actually **mean**?! **How** did he fulfil the OT?

We know how the Scribes and Pharisees interpreted the OT; they spent hours studying the Scriptures (and Saul [Paul] was one of the keenest), working out exactly what they meant and how they showed what the Israelites had to do to please God. And Saul was so convinced in his then interpretation of the OT that he felt he was serving God by killing people who were teaching things that he knew were **wrong**! (It’s nice to know that I’m not the first ‘Paul’ to get things stupidly wrong!)

So how **did** Jesus, and later Paul, interpret the OT? I have come to believe that Jesus interpreted it as showing us how God wants us to live in love with him, and how to love one another and to care for the marginalised.

This totally different way of looking at the OT struck me right between the eyes this morning, and it's there in black and white in the New Testament. Having said in Matthew 5 that he's come to fulfil the OT, Jesus then says that our righteousness must **exceed** that of the Scribes and Pharisees, or we'll never get into heaven. What?! This is getting worse, not better! What does he mean by that?!

Don't panic! Instead, just read from verse 21 to the end of chapter 6 to see how Jesus interprets what the OT really means. And it's all about relationships – with one another and with God – how those relationships can be encouraged and protected, and what our relationship with God should be like. **That** I think is what Jesus is drawing out of the Scriptures. He came to fulfil the Law in the sense that he showed us what its **ultimate purpose** was: to draw us into a loving relationship with the Living God (and not for us to live in fear of being zapped for getting things wrong!)

And Paul (having realised the error of his Pharisaic interpretation of the OT) says the same sort of thing: *Romans 13:8 Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbour as yourself." 10 Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.*

And then back to Jesus: *Matthew 22:35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

So if my interpretation of the OT (or NT, for that matter) actually does harm to my neighbour, then I need to check if my interpretation is correct.

In the books I've read, the authors (theologians) claim that both Jesus and Paul (esp. in Romans) quote scriptures to support their arguments in ways that a "careful exegesis of the passage would not allow". They say that Paul and Jesus are using an "overriding hermeneutic of love" (no, I'm not quite sure what 'hermeneutic' means either!); you interpret any passage in terms of how it displays God's redemptive, restorative love and justice. (Those authors, esp. Flood, but also Baker-and-Green, seem to me to be putting forward a scholarly argument in favour of this approach, and I can provide references if you're interested.)

Flood refers to this as "faithful questioning" of Scripture (Old and New), instead of "unquestioning obedience", because the latter can cause untold harm. By "faithful questioning", he and I mean that we start from "Yes, I believe in Jesus; I love him, I follow him to the best of my ability" and then say, "Let's discuss these difficult issues and see if there's a way we can show love for each other, and for those outside, those who don't even want to discuss it."

Please, for the sake of those (like my own family) who don't believe, can we work out how to communicate the love that Jesus showed, that spoke so powerfully to the lonely and the marginalised, that has transformed so many lives, but that annoyed those who thought the important thing was to be **right**?

Paul Bev. 29.8.18

4 Centrality of the cross of Christ

Thank you to those of you who have already begun to enter into discussion with me. The trouble is that although I said that my last missive would be my final one, those discussions have rekindled my thoughts. When I tried to have my quiet time this morning, I just couldn't stop thinking about what Christ achieved by his death and resurrection – the atonement.

In the past two years the cross has become, for me, much more important – absolutely central to my faith. I'm pleased that more than half the services I attend at my local Anglican church are Communion services, so that I'm constantly reminded of Jesus' sacrificial death for me.

Now, in trying to explain and appreciate something as wonderful and multifaceted as the atonement, we need to employ metaphors, and the New Testament has a number of different illustrations for what Christ achieved – it's like looking at a diamond from different directions.

Many years ago, when I went to Kenya to teach physics, I found that many of the illustrations that I had used in the UK were outside the experience of my pupils, so I had to think up new illustrations that they could relate to – otherwise I was going to fail to communicate.

What I have been reading has echoed my thinking that, in 21st century Britain, penal substitution really isn't the most helpful of the New Testament pictures, so how can we put the atonement across to people in a way that they can relate to?

Frankly, I have to admit that I'm a bit out of my depth here, so all I can do is share what I think is important and if any of you are more theological, perhaps you can help to put some flesh on the bones.

I've already said what I think is, for me, non-negotiable:

- 1) The central problem is human sin – broken relationships.
- 2) Our loving God has a plan to sort that problem.
- 3) The solution (salvation) centres on the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.
- 4) We need to respond in order to appropriate that salvation.

So what does this salvation look like? For me it has *got* to be relational. If it's not about building a relationship with a loving God, I don't want to know – this is where I'm at having “discovered” the Trinity. And surely this is what we have to be modelling in our churches! If we're a loving, forgiving, welcoming community, that has *got* to have a powerful effect on a shattered and broken world where loneliness is one of the biggest sources of unhappiness and ill health, both mental and physical.

(See my article in *The Magazine*, the Norwich Diocesan magazine. Reference on my web page.)

Secondly, I think what Jesus was trying to get across to us (think woman caught in adultery, woman at the well, prodigal son) was that God wants to deal with sin in terms of restoring relationships, so let's talk about “restorative justice”.

Sorry to go on about it, but this is why I think penal substitution is so unhelpful because it's all about “retributive justice” and it can so easily be misunderstood by those outside the church – it appears to present God as a wrathful individual who needs someone to suffer for our sins. And that's clearly *not* the God portrayed by Jesus.

As an illustration of that sort of misunderstanding: a friend who, despite having been brought up a churchgoer now doesn't see any need for “religion”, wrote: “*As I said, I had not previously met this idea of penal substitution [I had tried to explain it to him], and find it rather repellent. How can punishing an innocent person achieve anything but blatant injustice?*”

So to get back to the question I've been posing, and will happily spend any amount of time talking to anyone about, is to work out what *other* ways we can use to communicate God's love to those around us in the 21st century. How can we explain? What model can we use? What illustrations will make it clear to them (and it might be different for different people – certainly so for different cultures). They need to see that Jesus' death and resurrection is the very, very best news, ever!

We need to talk about this, PLEASE!

(I have a book that appears to offer some help, and have read it twice, but it's a bit heavy and theological for me. I'll read it again, make some notes, and see if I can share it in words of fewer syllables.)

I'll put something on the website as and when I have anything (hopefully) helpful to offer.

Paul Bev. 5.9.18

5 Interpreting the Scriptures

Does the church you attend believe in the Bible? Yes, so does ours! So do most Christian churches, I'd imagine... and so do the Jehovah's Witnesses. Every time I read John's gospel especially, I think "How can the JW's not see that Jesus is claiming, on page after page, equality with God?!" The trouble is that I'm reading a translation, and not the original text, and translation and interpretation are intimately linked. Translation is certainly not an exact science, as much as we'd like to think that the Bible we read each day gives us "a solid foundation on which to base our faith".

Let's go back a stage and ask: what's the purpose of the scriptures (= sacred writings)? If you've read my earlier missives, you'll know what I think. The scriptures are graciously given by God to help us know how to live in a loving relationship with him and with one another, and *not* to give us a sure knowledge of "the truth", i.e. what is right. For 48 years, I'd have made a good Pharisee (although I'd like to think I was a bit nicer than they were!): I could interpret the scriptures and I knew what was right, and I tried to teach it other people.

So have I now gone all wishy-washy? Do I not stand up for the truth anymore? Well, I still believe strongly that the Bible was inspired by God and that he will inspire us, as we seek to interpret it, but I no longer believe in "the truth" (as defined by whom, anyway?). So I don't believe in the infallibility of the Bible – it was written by humans – and I don't really like calling the Bible "the word of God", because only Jesus is The Word of God. And even then, to know what Jesus said and did, we have to rely on (translations of) the accounts written by fallible humans.

So, I'm sorry, but I don't think God has given us "certainty" on which to base our relationship with him. But anyway, do you *need* 100% certainty to have a relationship with someone? Of course not; a relationship is based on trust, on faith. And I think that constantly striving for certainty is actually a mark of unfaith, of insecurity; if we're secure in our relationship with the Lord, we don't need to "know" everything.

But I do believe that we need to read the Bible and interpret the Bible in order to know how to relate to God, the Holy Trinity (*I love saying that!*).

So, for starters, we need to decide if a given bit of the Bible carries literal truth ("God rides upon the wind"?) or metaphorical truth – the latter being no less "true" than the former. And even more difficult, we need to decide if what's written is culturally conditioned ("Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him?" says my namesake!).

But in a sense the whole Bible is culturally conditioned: it was written by a range of different authors, at different times, in particular cultures; that is something we need to factor into our interpretation, to avoid coming to conclusions that damage people's lives.

So what tools do we have, to help us in our interpretation? My Christian upbringing sees biblical exegesis as foundational. And we take on board what we are learning from archaeology, biblical scholarship, linguistic analysis (and probably more things, but I'm not a theologian); and all of these are giving us more and more help. Great!

However, there two other strands that I have come to value of late. The first is to view the scriptures with contemplation, meditation, absorption, immersion. I believe that if we "sit with" scripture, God will apply it to us and bring to our minds and hearts those things that will help our relationship grow and flourish.

Secondly, following on from my thinking about how we handle the difficult bits of the Bible – the OT especially but also to a lesser extent the NT – I'd say that we have to apply some sort of moral tests to the scriptures, to decide whether certain bits are right or wrong. (Did God really tell them to slaughter every single man, woman and

child?!) In any case, the scriptures take the form of a discussions, or even arguments, so we're carrying on in that tradition. In a number of cases, the authors disagree among themselves, e.g. "it pleased the Lord ... to ruin and destroy you" (Deut 28:63) as against "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Ezek 33:11. (And if you have an "answer" for that apparent disagreement, I can find you some more.)

So once again, I believe that we need to engage in "faithful questioning" – having enough faith/trust in God to be willing to question the scriptures. We don't want "unquestioning obedience" – and in any case, if we wanted the latter, someone would have to give us a definitive statement of what we needed to obey, so we're back again to human interpretation; back to Phariseeism.

So, if you feel moved to do so, let's grapple with some of the difficult bits of the scriptures. But not all the time – it's OK to revel in God's love as revealed in the scriptures and especially in Jesus!

And to end with, here's a non-Christian thought (which I've adopted): "*The most important thing you wear each day is... your expression*". And if we're worried each day whether we're "getting it right", we'll be wearing a constant frown and will project that to those we meet. But if we can rest in the Lord's love, trusting him for the difficult bits and revelling in his love and forgiveness, we'll have an open expression on our faces (but not necessarily grinning all the time!), because of our inner assurance, and that will rub off onto those around us.

May God bless you with his incredible love and make you a blessing to everyone you meet today.

Paul Bev. 6.9.18

6 Penny drop moment

No deep theology today, just a lovely penny-drop moment to share.

I've spent a lot of time in the Gospels in the past few years, and especially in the sermon on the mount. And that's where I was this morning when there was a heavy "Clunk!" sound – well, it was a heavy sound but it lightened my morning!

Now, I know that when you're thinking about something, you can read it into the text you're looking at. And yes, I have been rather struck (to put it mildly) by the fact that God, in his very essence, is relationship, but I don't think I'm making this up...

I mean, look at what Jesus says about prayer in Matt 6. He was clearly talking about what we, singular, should do in terms of prayer, because he says "go into your room", and talks about what we say to God "in secret". And what should we say? How should we pray when we're on our own? "**Our** father..." and in all the rest of the Lord's prayer, there's not a single "I" or "me".

And can you just imagine how the Pharisees would have reacted to that?! "**Our father...**" Do you think the Pharisees thought of God as a loving father, or rather as a holy and dreadful God with whom you had to be very careful, lest you did the wrong thing. But I digress, and this isn't the penny-drop...

It was actually Matt 7 that I was reading, not 6, but having read, I then started to pray, and as I very often do now, I started with the "Our father", and I didn't get beyond saying those first two words!

Anyway, chapter 7 is very relationship based, starting with (not) judging others... (Mind you, I wasn't sure what the pearls and swine bit was doing in there – any ideas, anyone?). Anyway, it's then into our attitude to prayer, with ask, seek, knock. So if we see God as a loving father, it changes how we pray because God knows what we need before we ask...

Then "Clang!" – no not "Clunk!" This wasn't a penny-drop but a "What's that doing there?!" moment.

In the middle of the paragraph (yes, I know Greek didn't have paragraphs, but the English does) comes a "So" (often an important word, so I'm told by preachers) "**So** do to others what you would have them do to you" – what they call "The Golden Rule". But **why** does that old (it's very old, isn't it? and occurs in other religions, doesn't it?) piece of advice follow as a "therefore" from knowing that God is a loving, giving heavenly father? Well, I guess it's another example of how relationship is central to everything.

But I've cheated you! I've stopped mid sentence... "So do to others what you would have them do to you... because..." Why? Can you remember what comes next? Clue: what other issue has been heavily exercising me of late? [Scroll down to find out]

“So do to others what you would have them do to you... because... **this sums up the Law and the Prophets.**”

Jesus is saying that the Scriptures they had in their hands in his day had an overall purpose, and it was a purpose that he said he had come to **fulfil**, and that was to enable us to live in love with him and with one another.

This makes reading the Old Testament so much easier – gives it a much more helpful focus.

But contrast Jesus’ attitude to the Scriptures with what the Pharisees thought was the whole point of the Scriptures: to show us exactly how we should live, to avoid offending God and risking getting zapped. And the Pharisees’ job, they saw, was to find out exactly what God wanted and make sure that other people knew. But let’s be kind to them; they **were** trying to help people; they thought they were doing what God wanted (and remember that Saul was a zealous Pharisee).

And contrast it also with my attitude as a 20th century Pharisee, trying to find out what the Bible (now including the New Testament) says about how we can bridge that terrible gulf between a holy God and an unholy me, and how Jesus’ death on the cross formed a bridge across which we could (well, crawl, presumably) to get to God on the other side. And I was also keen to keep Christian principles alive in society today by showing people what’s right and what’s wrong – all with good motives, of course.

Some of you may remember one curate at Holy Trinity. He was very well versed in the Scriptures, but he was unhappy. Suddenly, everyone said, “What’s happened to John?!” His sermons were amazing, he was so excited, and in a prayer meeting, there was no way we could have that awful thing where someone says, “Let’s pray” and then it starts “Dear God please do this, and that and give us this and that.” No, with John it was, “Dear God, it’s so wonderful to be here with you. Thank you so much for all you’ve done for us, etc, etc.”

And I remember a time when we listened to a series of talks by Colin Urquhart, called, “How to love and be loved”. One day I went into a bank and the cashier said, “Gosh you look happy today” and I said, “I’ve just realised how much God loves me!” and then added, “Oh, and he loves you too.”

And I remember a time when I read a book by Mark Stibbe (I think) about adoption and once again my heart was stirred.

So God has tried several times to tell me he loves me, but it’s taken me such a long time to take it on board.

May God bless you with his incredible love and make you a blessing to everyone you meet today.

Paul Bev. 8.9.18

P.S. I’m putting this down here because it’s so negative, but I Googled, “How can I be saved?”; I looked at the first site I was offered and its very first statement was, “Leave everybody out of it; it’s between you and God.” Yes, that really is what it said!

7 Is scripture infallible

I’m still grappling with how to approach the Scriptures, and in doing so I turned to a well-known passage: *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work* (2 Tim 3:16,17).

The Bible I’m using is an NIV Study Bible that I bought in August 1991, so I’ve had my money’s worth out of it, and have often found the notes very helpful. Referring to the note on *All Scripture*, it says that it means primarily the Old Testament, but that some of the other NT books would have been in circulation at the time of writing and were ‘equal in authority’ to the OT.

The note on *God-breathed* says, “Paul affirms God’s active involvement in the writing of Scripture, an involvement so powerful and pervasive that what is written is the infallible and authoritative word of God.” Really? Is that what ‘God-breathed’ means?

OK, but I’d like to ask the writers of that note, “What do you mean by ‘infallible’?” I can see how a person, like a Pope, might claim to be infallible because if we don’t know what he (or she?!) means by some statement, we can ask for clarification, and ask how it applies in this or that situation.

But how can a book be infallible? And in any case, which book(s) are they referring to? I’m guessing that they don’t mean that the NIV translation is infallible, but is even the Hebrew (and Greek if we include the NT) version infallible? And if so, how do I, as a non-Hebrew(Greek)-speaker know what’s ‘right’? So even if the Hebrew books were infallible, I would still have to trust a human being’s interpretation + translation; and I say ‘interpretation’ because you can’t translate something without some degree of interpreting. (The JWs have a very high view of Scripture – in some ways, they take it more seriously than we do – and I guess they use the same Hebrew and Greek sources as we do, but they come up with a **very** different translation!)

So, as much as I might like to have an ‘infallible and authoritative word of God’ I do have to rely on other people’s interpretations.

But if we could have an ‘infallible and authoritative word of God’, would that be helpful? Oh, yes! It would enable me to know what’s right and what’s wrong. I could pronounce on whether divorce was right or wrong (or in what circumstances it’s right or wrong). And abortion. And gay relationships. And...

Do you see the blind alley I’m trying to lead you into?

For my first 48 years, I was pretty sure that, by and large, I was ‘right’. But knowing (or thinking you know) what’s right and wrong can be very, very dangerous. What did Jesus spend much of his ministry doing? Apart from associating with, and caring for, the poor and marginalised, he spent much of his time giving the Scribes and Pharisees what-for: “You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean.” and “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” Why was he getting so cross with them?!

They (and Saul – a.k.a. Paul – was chief among them!) were people who took the Scriptures very, very seriously. They studied them carefully and worked out what was right and what was wrong, and they took the time and trouble to do “teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness”. So what’s wrong with that?! Where did the Pharisees go so horribly wrong? And how did I go so badly wrong for all those years?

They misunderstood the **purpose** of the Scriptures (to draw people into a covenant relationship with God and one another) and **therefore** they misinterpreted them – massively.

For years I’ve struggled with my own faith, feeling that it was wrong in some way, but not being able to articulate my unhappiness. I would say that I’m now beginning to find a way of interpreting the Scriptures that (I hope and believe) is a bit more like the way Jesus interpreted them, and less like the Pharisees.

(This has been a bit negative, sorry, but I’ve tried to express the positive side of this in essay (5) Interpreting scripture.)

Paul Bev. 16.9.18

8 The wrath of God is being revealed

At the church I now attend, we’re just about to start running a couple of Alpha courses, and I’m going to be helping on the one on Tuesday lunchtimes; another group will run on Thursday evenings, and we’ll come together at different points in the course.

Part of me is excited, but part is worried. I want to share the joy I now feel in this loving relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit – but will Alpha present God in this glorious relational way? I'm thinking back to "basic Christianity courses I have known" and shuddering. I'm trying not to be negative in these essays, but the more I realise the wonder of this really GOOD news, the more I realise how I (we) have misrepresented it for so many years. I'll give you two negative memories before contrasting it with the more positive approach I'm groping and stumbling towards. (My new life *feels* good, but I need to know that it's properly founded in Scripture, and isn't just my wishful thinking.)

The absolute lowest point on an evangelistic course was when a curate at my former church asked the assembled group, "If you arrived at the gates of heaven and wanted to be allowed in, what would you say?" Setting aside for a moment the vision of heaven as a walled and gated compound, you can imagine the responses that attendees came up with. "Actually, that's wrong," announced the curate, "The Bible says that, however hard we try, we can never be good enough, because God is holy. But the good news is that God loves us so much that he provides a better way through which we can gain access to heaven." Well, I can't remember his exact words, but that was the gist.

Less unhelpful but more relevant to the positive expression that I'm reaching towards, we had discussions several years earlier when we were trying to decide on a suitable course. We found quite a good course, but it just needed a bit of tweaking. So we wrote an extra session to go *before* the evening where we told them about sin (followed the week after, of course, by the cross – the solution to the problem). This session explained about the holiness of God, because you can't really understand the awfulness of sin until you appreciate the holiness of God.

But enough of the negative, sorry.

For a while now, I've been wrestling with the wrath of God (so to speak). I cannot and will not sing, "On the cross when Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied" because it is so easily misunderstood – it paints a very different picture of God from Jesus' description of a God who hitches up his skirts, runs down the road, hugs his son, hardly allowing him time to get out the first line of his prepared 'sinner's prayer'. The father shouts to everyone, "Rejoice! My son has come home! It's party time!"

But, yes, the wrath of God is plainly there in Scripture, so I can't ignore it. And it's not just in the Old Testament. In the NIV New Testament, the word 'wrath' occurs 31 times. Ten of those are in Revelation, but I'd expect some wrath, as God finally sorts out the mess we've created. Of the remaining 21, only four are in the Gospels: two directed by Jesus against the Pharisees, one about the end times and one in John 3:36: 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever *rejects the Son* will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him' (my emphasis).

The remaining 17 are all in the Pauline writings, especially Romans. I'm not going to excise my namesake's writings from the New Testament, so let's face it square on. As I say, here I'm struggling, stumbling forward towards an understanding that combines the incredible love, mercy, forgiveness and grace of the 'Prodigal Father', with the idea of God's wrath.

(Attached below are a few thoughts on each of the passages that refer to God's wrath, in case they might be helpful.)

So when I mentioned the wrath of God, what came to your mind? What have we been taught about the wrath of God over the years? What do you think of when I start this quote?... **Romans 1:18** *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against...* [please spend some time thinking about this – or maybe I can prompt you?] Wasn't there some stuff about "sinful desires" and "sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another"? And then "filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless." Phew! I'm not surprised that God was angry with us! Quite right!

No, *no, no!* That's totally wrong! Yes, those are quotes from Romans 1, but I've deliberately led you into a false reading of the passage, and a wrong view of God's wrath.

We see it like this: We do things wrong therefore God is wrathful. Absolutely incorrect, sorry!

Let's go back to Romans 1 and start again. Let's check out the context...

16. I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. 17 For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

I don't know any Greek, but I remember a preacher once saying that 'righteousness' wasn't so much about **doing** the right things, but about **living** in a right relationship with God (Yes, I know I'm harping on again about relationships, but that's what has transformed life for me of late!)

Be that as it may, Paul says that the "good news" is received by faith; by trusting God; by coming to God and trusting that the love he offers is real – that same love that Jesus talked about again, *and again, and again*.

So that's the context. Now, heads down, here comes the 'wrath' bit!...

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19. since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. (my emphasis)

God is cross with people who, although they know the truth, somehow hide it from (themselves and from) other people.

20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

I find this very interesting because at the point in my life where I pulled out of the sect and thought "Maybe God doesn't even exist, and it's all wishful thinking!" – I then thought, "No! What I see of the world around me convinces me that, at the very least, God does exist." Then because, in the sect, we'd spent a lot of time looking at Jesus' life and sayings in the Gospels, I turned there to look for the truth. (Sorry, I'm getting distracted.)

21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

When people actually know God and yet refuse to acknowledge him, they then build up their own ways of interpreting the world around them – this can take many forms, even ones that look very religious, but if they're not based on knowing the love of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it's just creating God in man's own image. And what's the result...?

24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another etc, etc, etc.

The **result** of not living in a loving relationship with God is broken relationships, pain, sorrow, anger, alienation, loneliness... you name it!

Anyone, *anyone, anyone* who wants to live in relationship with God will not, *not, not* have to face the wrath of God. Just show the slightest hint of wanting to head home to God, and he'll come racing out to meet you, arms open wide to embrace you and he'll throw a party because he's so pleased to have you back.

That's why this is all really, really, really GOOD NEWS!

*Matt 3:7 “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming **wrath**?”*

*Luke 3:7 “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming **wrath**?”*

The Pharisees were, par excellence, those who studied the Scriptures, in order to tell people what they must do to please God. And Jesus told them off for laying burdens on people’s shoulders and then not being willing to help them carry those burdens.

*21:20. “When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. 21 Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. 22 For this is the time of punishment in fulfilment of all that has been written. 23 How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and **wrath** against this people. 24 They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.*

This is about the end times, I think, and though I haven’t really spent time studying this passage, I don’t think it’s saying anything to contradict what I’ve suggested above, do you?

*John 3: The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. 36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s **wrath** remains on him.*

As I’ve said above, the wrath only comes on those who **reject** Jesus, and even then, the wrath isn’t what God’s going to do to you if you reject Jesus; rather it’s the inevitable result of what you are doing to yourself by rejecting Jesus’ love.

Romans

*1:18 The **wrath** of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness*

I’ve referred to this above.

*2:5 because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up **wrath** against yourself for the day of God’s **wrath**, when his righteous judgment will be revealed*

Once again, it’s if we **reject** God’s love and God’s way that we are bringing God’s wrath on ourselves.

*2:8 But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be **wrath** and anger.*

Ditto.

*3:5 But if our unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his **wrath** on us? (I am using a human argument.) 6. Certainly not!*

A simple comment here can’t deal with this. It’s part of a bigger argument that needs further study, but again, it does **not** support the idea of God zapping us because we’ve done wrong.

*4:14 For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, 15 because law brings **wrath**.*

Again, this is part of a bigger argument.

*5:9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s **wrath** through him!*

Through Jesus’ death on the cross, we are reconciled to God, so the wrath (which we know comes to those who actively reject God’s way) will definitely not be coming our way. Hallelujah!

*9:22 What if God, choosing to show his **wrath** and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his **wrath** – prepared for destruction? 23 What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – 24 even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?*

If God chooses to have grace on us and forgive us, even when we stray, can we say “God shouldn’t do that! A holy God should condemn sin!” What?! Are we trying to tell God what he should and shouldn’t do?! Yes, we rebel, and

no, we don't deserve to be forgiven, but if God wants to contradict what's "just and fair" he can do so, if he chooses. The older brother was convinced that what his father had done in forgiving his brother manifestly wasn't fair – and he was right, it wasn't fair – but let God be God! (I'm currently re-reading – for about the fourth time! – Philip Yancey's *What's so amazing about grace?*, and I'm finding it really helpful on this issue.)

*12:19 Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's **wrath**.*

Same idea here, really. When someone hurts us, or hurts someone we love, we quite reasonably want to take revenge, but that's the way of 'ungrace', as Yancey calls it, and it just leads to more and more pain. Leave it to God! Trust him because he knows that unjust suffering hurts (from personal experience, he can say that it hurts like Hell), but grace conquers if we 'leave room' for God to do it his way.

*13:4 For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of **wrath** to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.*

God can, if he chooses, use secular agents to bring about his righteousness.

Ephesians

*2:3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of **wrath**.*

When we lived for ourselves, yes, we suffered the consequences of our own actions. "Sin is its own punishment" is a wise expression I read recently. God doesn't "punish" us; he doesn't have to, because we punish ourselves.

*5:6 Let no-one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's **wrath** comes on those who are disobedient.*

Ditto.

[Later addition to these notes: Eph 5 is written to **Christians** who are living self-indulgently. *They* will receive God's wrath.]

Colossians

*3:5. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these, the **wrath** of God is coming [on those who are disobedient]. 7 You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived.*

Ditto.

(I think someone has later added that "on those who are disobedient", as an echo of Eph 5:6. This is to avoid the possible misunderstanding that we've acknowledged: No, God's wrath does **not** come on us **because of** 'sexual immorality, impurity, lust etc'.)

1 Thessalonians

*1:9 They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming **wrath**.*

Ditto

*2:14 You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, 15 who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men 16 in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The **wrath** of God has come upon them at last.*

Yes, God's wrath **is** going to come on those who deliberately try to stop people hearing about the love he has for everyone.

*5:9 For God did not appoint us to suffer **wrath** but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

God loves us – there's absolutely no way he would want us to suffer by turning from his love.

Revelation

*6:16 They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the **wrath** of the Lamb! 17 For the great day of their **wrath** has come, and who can stand?"*

What an interesting phrase, "the wrath of the Lamb"! Sounds contradictory. This needs more study, in context.

11:16 And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshipped God, 17 saying: "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. 18 The nations were angry; and your **wrath** has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great – and for **destroying those who destroy the earth.**" (my emphasis)
Again, the wrath is against those who stand against God's loving purposes.

14:9 A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, 10 he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his **wrath**. He will be tormented with burning sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb.
Ditto.

14:18 Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, "Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine, because its grapes are ripe." 19 The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's **wrath**. 20 They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1600 stadia. 15:1. I saw in heaven another great and marvellous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues – last, because with them God's **wrath** is completed.
Ditto.

15:7 Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the **wrath** of God, who lives for ever and ever. 8 And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no-one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed. 16:1. Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, "Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's **wrath** on the earth."
Ditto.

16:19 The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his **wrath**.
Ditto.

19:14 The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. 15 Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron sceptre." He treads the winepress of the fury of the **wrath** of God Almighty. 16 On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.
Ditto.

9 Full of grace and truth

(I'm aware that this essay is far from a cogently argued treatise, but that reflects my ongoing struggle to think it all out, and so any help anyone can offer would be much appreciated. Thanks.)

Let me start on firm ground... If God came to earth, what would he look like? Answer, he **did** come to earth, and we do know what he was like: *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.* (John 1:14) And how absolutely wonderful it would be if every Christian was 'full of grace and truth'!

In an effort to be a little more like Jesus, I have recently been re-reading (for about the fourth time in 8/10 years) Yancey's brilliant 1997 book *What's so amazing about grace?* – I wanted to see if it had anything that would speak into my new-found Trinitarian/relational approach to God. It does. Grace is all about loving relationships.

Yancey tells us how, as a youngster among the Southern Baptists of the USA, it was impressed upon him that the Bible teaches that certain things are wrong: drinking and smoking, of course, but also make-up and jewellery, hair length of boys, skirt length for girls, not reading any Sunday newspapers or playing sport on the Sabbath... and the

list went on. But those Christians really believed that those things were wrong, and Yancey says that at Bible college they tried to justify from the Scriptures that they were wrong.

He also tells, very powerfully, of his friendship with Mel Smith, who was gay, and how he tried to let grace and truth inform their relationship. He felt that Mel was wrong in what he was doing, but he stuck with him, as a friend, through thick and thin. And this was at a time when gay pride marches were opposed by groups of placard-carrying Christians who shouted slogans that I certainly won't repeat here – you can read the book for yourself.

Today, I have questions only, not answers, but as I've said, we need to be faithfully questioning each other and the Scriptures; we need to be challenging one another's assumed ideas (prejudices?). That's not to prove that someone else is wrong but rather to be willing to change our own views for the sake of love, of grace, and yes, of truth.

So my first question is this. Is it ever the job of the church to tell society at large what's right and what's wrong? Yes, Jesus tells us that we should be light (illuminating) and salt (a preservative), but **how** should we do that? One of the major difficulties we have had over the past few centuries is that, in countries where Christianity is in the majority, we've been able to influence the moral life of society for what we see as the better. In the UK, our legal system is based on Christian morality, but what about now that we're not in the majority?!

The very real danger is that the church – and therefore by implication the individual Christian – is seen as telling the rest of society what's right and wrong – moralising and being judgemental. I've often complained that the media, films, TV, etc. 'unfairly' seem to portray Christians as bigoted and judgemental. But is it **actually** unfair? Or is that just what people genuinely observe about us?!

But maybe there are issues on which we **should** take a stand, and so my second question is, how do we decide whether any given issue really is right or wrong?

For example, I'm pleased and proud that Christians were so prominent in the fight to abolish slavery, but ironically, one of the books I've read (sorry, I can't remember which!) pointed out that when Christians led that fight, they tried to argue from Scripture that it was wrong. But actually, that's a very difficult line to support. True, the Bible teaches that slave owners should treat their slaves well, and that although slaves should gain their freedom if they can, otherwise they should respect their masters and work hard, even when they're not observed. But it never actually says that slavery is wrong.

And it's interesting, isn't it, that something so obviously morally wrong as slavery wasn't clearly condemned by Jesus or by the early church?! Maybe that's because Jesus didn't actually come to teach us what is right and wrong? Maybe he came to teach us the way of love and grace so that we can **move forward**, changing society's accepted morality to enable us more easily all to live in love with one another.

To take another issue, what about chastising children? In the past, some Christians have argued that the Bible clearly teaches "spare the rod and spoil the child". But psychological research has clearly shown the negative effects of corporal punishment on children. Does God want us to ignore this research or, rather, to be willing to change our views?

I've given all these examples to suggest that claiming "the Bible clearly teaches" is not that straightforward; it depends, of course, **how** we interpret Scripture. For example, doesn't Paul clearly teach: *Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him?* (1 Cor 11:14) Yes, we say, but that is relative to the culture of the time. OK, so what about *If [women] want to enquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.* (1 Cor 11:35) Culturally conditioned? Yes, I think it is, but how do we decide **which** bits are culturally conditioned? So I for one am much more reticent to say to anyone, "the Bible clearly teaches...".

Now, to tread on really difficult and potentially divisive ground, what about something that, as Christians, we've always been taught was morally wrong – homosexual practice? Taking on from the example of chastising children, there's plenty of research (although we hardly need it) to show that ignoring and/or repressing same-sex feelings has caused great psychological harm to many people.

The important thing is that, although Yancey thought that what Mel was doing was wrong, he still supported him as a friend, in every way he could. (Actually, I'd be very interested to know Yancey's view 20 years on, whether he still holds quite so strongly the wrongness of homosexual practice.) Personally, I have hitherto assumed, unquestioningly, that homosexuality was wrong, but that was not from any careful Bible study – just from personal feelings and prejudice – but I no longer hold that strong view. I'm really not sure what I think, but it is certainly not, for me, a 'the Bible clearly teaches' issue.

Father, please give me more grace and truth... especially grace.

Paul Bev. 8.10.18

10 Why did Jesus die

I thought I wasn't going to be doing any more writing for a while, because of starting the Alpha course but, on the contrary, the Alpha course has prompted this current essay, in particular, the session on "Why did Jesus die?"

(It's available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mm23Mybew8A> and I do think it's well worth watching – 28 minutes.)

As I watched the video, I made some notes:

- 1) sin = doing wrong things
—> punishment
- 2) sins —> broken relationship with God (so we need Jesus to save us)
- 3) *(my alternative idea, that I scribbled down at the time...)*
broken relationship with God —> sins
- 4) evil has been defeated
- 5) death has been defeated
- 6) forgiveness is possible
- (added from thinking back to the film...)*
- 7) the cross can help when facing suffering (re: young chap's dad's illness and death)
- 8) the cross brings reconciliation
- 9) forgiveness is possible, indeed it's essential

(I've only added the numbers, so I can refer back to them.)

I was thrilled that there was so much of the breadth and depth of what Jesus achieved through the cross and resurrection, and there was repeated emphasis – nay, insistence – that this is all based on the fact that God loves us so very, very much.

However, I hope I'm wrong, but I fear that people, coming to this from outside, may hear:

- a) The problem is that we've done things wrong = we have sinned
- b) We deserve to be punished
- c) Jesus was punished in our place (analogy: Nazis want to kill ten people, but volunteer offers to take someone's place, as he's a Catholic priest and has no family)

d) Add to that the graphic example of forgiveness: Corrie Ten Boom forgiving one of the guards from Ravensbrück concentration camp. (Praise God that she forgave him!)

e) Add to that the ex-prisoner who took a strimmer to someone's feet and who took drugs and committed other crimes. (Praise God that he forgave him and he's now helping others in similar circumstances.)

All very memorable, but how does it help these two imaginary characters, Albert and Bertha?

Albert is a really, really nice guy. He was brought up in a loving family, has lovingly raised his own family and then, after his wife died, he selflessly cared for his dying mother. But he just doesn't see any point in being a Christian.

Bertha was abused by her father, and later by her husband, she had no support from anyone because she never complained, and she ended up as a prostitute. ("Go to church? Why would I go there? I feel bad enough about myself already!") [character pinched from *What's so amazing about grace?*]

No, sorry, I don't have any easy answers to help A and B, but can I offer a couple of possible pointers?

First, I know we love to see things in simple cause-and-effect ways, but my note (2) may not be terribly helpful. And does the Bible *actually* teach that we did things wrong and then, as a result, we broke our relationship with a holy God, who cannot look on sin?

So, in my note (3), I pointed to an alternative (but hopefully still biblical) way of seeing sin: the root of the problem is that we ignore God ("*Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities ... have been clearly seen ... so that men are without excuse.*" – Rom 1:20) and, as a *result*, things go wrong.

One of the books I've read (no idea which, sorry!) said that it isn't that God punishes us for our sins, rather that sin is its own punishment. God *allows* sin to take its course and allows our lives to get messed up, in the hope that we'll come to our senses: "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!" – Then just watch him breaking all social conventions, racing down the road and hugging his smelly, pig-stained son! Praise God for his amazing love!

Maybe we should be teaching that it's SIN that's the problem, not sins (plural); it's our attitude to God that's at the root of everything that goes (and has gone) wrong in the world – everything.

So what is SIN? Being simplistic, I like the definition we gave to the 6–10-year-olds in our kids' club at my former church:

Shove off, God — **I**'m in charge — **N**o to your ways

And maybe I can change it a bit, in a way that might help Albert:

Sounds nice, thanks, but — **I** don't feel any need — **N**ot just now, anyway

If God created the whole universe and loves us desperately and passionately, and is willing to die for us, to reconcile us to himself, then saying, "Not now, thanks", is a very unwise choice, to say the least. But personally, I don't blame Albert for saying no thanks, when we present him with "You're a sinner who deserves punishment, but Jesus died for you".

And what about Bertha? Sorry, I don't have an answer; I'm hoping that some of you will be able to help Bertha. I relate better to Albert (not that I'm as nice a guy as he is, but I've never strimmed anyone's feet). But I know for sure that Bertha won't be helped by "You're a sinner who deserves punishment, but Jesus died for you".

Not answers, just questions, but hopefully this is faith-ful questioning I'm doing, and I'm very, very, very excited by what God is doing in my life, and in Sue-and-my's life, and (please God) in the lives of the dozen or so folk coming to our Alpha course.

Paul Bev. 12.10.18

Bibliography

Irwin, Ben (2015) *The Story of King Jesus – a brilliant* children's book that traces humankind's repeated decision to "do things my way" (starting from Adam & Eve) and God's relentless, loving pursuit of us, to draw us back to Him, sending Abraham, then Moses, then the judges, and eventually Jesus, and each time... well, yes, you've got the idea! Brilliant!

Yancey, Philip (1997) *What's so amazing about grace?* A very challenging book!

11 Core beliefs

When I was attending that 'Bible study group' that had effectively become a sect, my life was controlled by fear. Meetings eventually became very ad hoc, and the leader would phone and say, "We're having a study in an hour's time". I used to dread my mobile phone ringing (he was the only person who rang my mobile). If I said I was too busy, I knew I'd be disapproved of for not really being serious about wanting to be saved.

It was stupid of me, I know, but his very real healing and prophetic gifts gave him credibility in my eyes. But the result was that I thought that we, in that tiny group, were the only ones who had the true truth – all based, of course, on (this chap's interpretation of) the Bible. Indeed, latterly he had begun to do his own translation of the Bible.

So what were my core beliefs? What was I believing in? I was basing my faith on the views of a 21st century person – on his interpretation of (his translation of) the Bible.

Compare that with my faith as a whatever-kind-of-Evangelical-Christian I've been for the past 50 years. I was Bible-centred, I maintained a truly biblical faith. That faith was based on years of study – my study? Well, sort of. But if I'm honest, my study and my faith were based on what I was taught by 'the elders' (in the broadest sense) of the church. But we Evangelicals were right, we held to 'the truth of the Bible', and we held it strongly – we belonged to a 'Bible-believing church'. As a student in Cambridge in the late 1960s it was made very clear to me how the CICCUC held the line against the liberals (SPCK) as they 'watered down the truth of the Bible'.

And my faith was based, of course, only on proper translations of the Bible – those translations that an Evangelical could approve of.

So I guess I'm saying that my faith was based on my group's interpretation (refined over many years) of my group's translations of the Bible.

"Just like the Jehovah's Witnesses, you mean?" Well, yes, but they are in error, whereas we're not, of course; we're right and they are wrong.

"You mean like you were in your sect?" Oh, well, yes, sort of.

I'm not trying to rubbish anyone's beliefs, but there is an irresistible logic in comparing these three situations – different in degree maybe, different in the numbers of people in each group, but logically similar. We all rely, for our core beliefs, on what 'our group' believes and teaches.

And our translations, like it or not, are based on our beliefs. Every time I read John's Gospel, I wonder how on earth JW's manage to translate it in such a way that they miss Jesus' divinity: "Then those who were in the boat worshipped him" or "We are not stoning you for any of these but ... because you, a mere man, claim to be God." But JW's are not dishonest people and they take the Bible seriously, very seriously.

So, what happens if there are things we are not sure of, maybe bits of the Bible that we're unhappy about? Are we allowed to question our group's teachings? Certainly, in my sect and in the JW's, fear is the motivator – no-one dares to question the leader(s) for fear of being disapproved of, and maybe even of being totally rejected by the group.

But what about 'our group'? Are Evangelicals allowed to challenge the 'accepted' beliefs? Is it OK to question some of what 'the Bible clearly teaches'?

As I've said before, what I've been struggling to achieve just recently is 'faithful questioning' as opposed to 'unquestioning obedience'. These terms aren't my articulation, but come from some of the books I've been reading – books that I know some of my fellow Christians would say go against what 'the Bible clearly teaches'.

In my next essay, I shall try to argue that faithful questioning is very much what Jesus stood for and therefore what we should be doing... and faithful questioning was what sealed Jesus' fate, humanly speaking!

Paul Bev. 26.10.18

12 Religion or Relationship

About seven years ago, I left the sect and was at spiritual 'ground zero', where I asked, "Well, what *do* I believe? Does God exist, even?" Thankfully, one thing I did gain from the sect was an increased focus on Jesus in the Gospels – a quick look at my Bible, and you'll see which bit is most heavily thumbed.

As I was in the process of rebuilding my faith, maybe two years in, I was in my ground-floor office (the ex dining room): "Would you like a cup of coffee?" said a relation by marriage. I stuck my head through the hatch into the kitchen to respond. And a second question followed fairly quickly: "Paul, how did you become a Christian?"

I briefly explained to the two family members, but very quickly the conversation moved to, "How can you say that Jesus is the *only* way to God?" and I can't remember the exact wording but the essence was that this is an arrogant and unreasonable claim. For 20–25 minutes (still with my head through the hatch!) I squirmed and struggled to justify John 14:7, of which they were able to quote "no-one comes to the father except through me". But, thankfully, Sue arrived back from Brownies and the subject changed. Phew!

Well, what would *you* have said?! I tried to focus on the fact that it was Jesus as a person that I was so impressed by, and because he was such an amazing person, I had to accept what he said. But it didn't change the fact that those were his words, and it does seem totally unreasonable, on the face of it: "Christians are right and everyone else is wrong" – end of story!

Fast forward to this past two years, where I've (re-)discovered the incredible joy of a relationship with God – the God who IS relationship. And now that I feel so much more secure in God's amazing love, I have recently felt able to revisit this difficult topic. In my essays, I've been mulling over the idea of 'faithful questioning' of the Scriptures, rather than just blindly obeying what I've always been taught to believe, all these (48) years.

I remember an eye-opening (and eye-watering!) sermon on the parable of the sower. "We've heard sermons on this passage SO many times! Will you pray with me that God will actually teach us something new today?" We did, and God did. My summary: "God's a totally rubbish farmer! He chucks the seed willy-nilly, all over the place – he doesn't seem to worry where the seed goes. It would have been SO much more sensible to have carefully placed

the seed only in the good soil.” But that’s not what God’s like! He loves us SO much that he’ll take every possible opportunity to reach us; he’s willing to ‘waste’ seed just so long as there’s some chance that we’ll respond.

Add to that Jesus’ story of the prodigal son, which has become *such* an important parable to me. But hang on! Why do we call it ‘the prodigal son’? I think it should be called ‘the prodigal father’. Look at the Oxford dictionary’s definition of ‘prodigal’: (1) Spending money or using resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant. (2) Having or giving something on a lavish scale.

Yes, yes, yes! That’s what God is like, isn’t it?... Well, isn’t it?!

Can you see what we’ve done to that parable? We’ve turned it the wrong way round. It’s not about son – and anyway, what about the other son? It’s not about how we need to repent and turn away from our sin. It’s about God’s grace, his totally unreasonable, unfair GRACE. It’s about how he’s totally over the top in the way he behaves, searching for the son, and then racing down the road when he gets the slightest indication that the son is heading in his direction. And it’s also about how he tries to show his grace to the older brother too – to those who have been “doing the right thing all these years”, and it seems like God’s been ignoring us. No, he hasn’t! “Everything I have is yours!” says the father. He loves both sons desperately, desperately!

Sorry, this isn’t very coherent, but hopefully you see where I’m at. God loves and loves and loves, and gives and gives and gives, totally unreasonably, says Jesus. That’s what the father is like. That’s the relationship we’re invited into. And then it’s from the security of that relationship that we can look at – ‘faithfully question’ – some of the Bible passages that we find difficult.

I’ve run out of time to deal with John 14:7, except to say that, in wrestling with it, I’ve also looked at the only other ‘exclusivist’ claim that I can find (can you suggest any others?), Acts 4:12 “no other name under heaven...by which you must be saved”, and I’ve also added in Acts 2:38–40 (esp. v.40). So, here’s your homework. Fill in this table:

| | To whom is it addressed? And what’s the essential message? | To whom do we try to apply it? And what main point do we draw from it? |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| John 14:7 | | |
| Acts 4:12 | | |
| Acts 2:40 | | |
| Bonus work: (Luke 15:11-31) | | |

For what it’s worth, my notes on the subject are on the next page.

Paul Bev. 27.10.18

| | To whom is it addressed? And what's the essential message? | To whom do we try to apply it? And what main point do we draw from it? (Please forgive a little over-statement here.) |
|-------------------|---|--|
| John 14:7 | <i>Jesus' very closest followers, who'd followed him through thick and thin and were about to go through some severe testing.</i> He is the way (the one to follow), the truth (full of grace and truth) and the life (in all its fullness – so feed on him); if you want a relationship (and they did, desperately) with the father then it's through Jesus... and the Holy Spirit, as he says in almost the same breath. | <i>People who don't believe in Jesus</i> (and those who haven't even heard of him?). The only way to be saved is by believing in Jesus. No Jesus, no salvation. |
| Acts 4:12 | <i>The religious (Jewish) leaders.</i> By thinking they had got God all sorted out and by trying to enforce their ideas on other people, they had ended up opposing God and had killed Jesus. | <i>People who don't believe in Jesus.</i> The only way to be saved is by believing in Jesus. No Jesus, no salvation. |
| Acts 2:40 (+v.38) | “This corrupt generation” = <i>the religious establishment</i> : the ‘Church’ of the day. Avoid religion like the plague! ‘Repent’ = turn away from religion and be baptised = enter into a new relationship with God (whom you can't see) through Jesus (whom you can see – well, they could have seen, and we have eye-witness accounts to read). | <i>The godless people of today's society.</i> They need to turn their backs on their godlessness and join the church, where people do their very best not to do the kind of awful things that ruin today's society. |
| (Luke 15:11-31) | <i>Everyone with even the slightest interest in Jesus.</i> God loves you more than you could ever imagine, whether you run away from God or whether you stick with him but are super-grumpy! He loves you anyway, and loves and loves and loves and loves and loves and loves and loves and | <i>Unbelievers who have turned their back on God and done some terrible things.</i> They need to repent of the things they have done wrong, and because God loves them he'll allow them back into his family. |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | loves and loves and loves and loves and loves and loves and loves and loves and loves! | And the older son? Well, I guess we need to be careful not to complain when we work hard for God and yet we don't seem to get much thanks. God <i>does</i> love us really. |
|--|--|--|

How awful it would be if, with the best of motives, we became like the Pharisees (the elder brother?) trying to work out and tell people how they need to come to church, believe in Jesus, and then they can do what pleases God.

I think I'd sum up Jesus' teaching as a tirade against RELIGION and a relentless pursuit of us, to help us know how we can have abundant life – a RELATIONSHIP with God, through Jesus and through the Holy Spirit.

| RELIGION | RELATIONSHIP |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| Fear | Love / Worship |
| Shame | Restoration / Adoption |
| Estrangement | Reconciliation |
| Isolation | Community / Communion |
| Rejection | Acceptance |
| Worthlessness | Supreme value |
| Punishment | Forgiveness (repeated) |
| Exact meaning ('letter') | Spirit |
| Doing | Being |
| Preaching | Listening |
| Obedience | Faithful questioning |
| Wrath | Grace |
| Word | Spirit |
| Discriminating right and wrong | Enemy love |

13 Feedback

Thanks so much to all those who have responded to my musings. Much of your feedback has been very encouraging (“It’s good to be challenged and made to think about what we believe”) but some has been cautionary – and quite right too! OK, so some of my writing has been deliberately provocative, but it is all offered in the spirit of faithful questioning.

Sadly, by my narrowness over the years, I believe, has ‘innoculated’ some members of my own family against the Christian faith. It is on their behalf that I’ve been struggling with the “Jesus is the **only** way to God” idea. And having raised Acts 4:12 with you folks only yesterday, guess what our vicar quoted in his Bible Sunday sermon! Drat! Bother! Blow! I’m squirming.

I want to say that Jesus is the very, very best way, and anyway, why would anyone want to go by a different way, once they’ve come to know Jesus? And I also still maintain very strongly that a loving God is *not* looking for ways by which he can exclude people; he desperately wants us all to come to him and be part of his family, his kingdom. And on that basis, I don’t have any fear for those who’ve never heard about Jesus; God is *not* going to assign someone to eternal separation from him just because they died not knowing about Jesus. Sorry, but that’s not the God that Jesus portrayed!

But just now I was rereading “Recovering the Scandal of the Cross” (a bit theological, but I’ve found it very helpful, as long as I concentrate hard while I’m reading), and I came to a helpful passage (p.69, 2011 Edn), just after quoting Ex 34:6,7 (“...merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness ... for a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...” – a strong antidote for anyone who sees ‘the God of the OT’ as wrathful). Anyway, Baker and Green then say:

The whole of salvation rests on God's initiative, the single source of salvation is God, and God's salvific purpose comes to expression in the one event of grace, the redemptive act of Christ...

So if Jesus IS God, then to say that "Jesus is the only way to God" is simply not an issue, it's self-evident! To rephrase that sentence "God is the only way to God" – well, of course he is! No problem!

Why then have I been struggling so hard with it? I'll tell you what I now think my problem is. It's not the 'who', it's the 'how'.

Yes, Jesus is "the way", but the church tradition I've 'grown up in' (for 48 years!) actually goes *beyond* John 14:7. It tries to say "and this is *how* it works", i.e. there's only one method by which Jesus makes that salvation available. And this is where I shall probably find myself disagreeing with some of you.

I have always been taught that **THE** mechanism by which we are saved is that when Jesus died on the cross my sin was placed on him and he took the penalty that I deserve so that God's wrath against me was turned aside – the idea of so-called penal substitution or penal satisfaction.

Personally, I'm not 100% sure that this really is a correct biblical way of viewing what Jesus achieved on the cross. I'm not saying it's wrong per se, but I'm just not sure it's helpful, certainly not for everyone in today's culture – and surely we want (God wants) people to come to faith in Jesus.

And if you're of the view that penal substitution is *the way*, the only way, by which we are saved then how did God manage to enable the church to spread around the world and flourish for hundreds of years before anyone had ever heard of the idea of penal substitution?!

And don't forget, the Bibles we use today were translated by people for whom penal substitution was an accepted part of their belief system, and that is bound to have influenced the way in which various passages were translated.

But I'm not being negative; I've never felt more positive in my faith, EVER. I would say that, having taken my focus away from penal substitution, I am much more 'cross centred' than I've ever been. Through all my strugglings, I've realised in how many different and wonderful ways the Bible speaks of Christ's redemptive work – a glorious kaleidoscope of images that help me to appreciate and celebrate the amazing work of God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

Maybe after I've reread this book I'll be able to offer some pointers as to a more helpful way of explaining the glory of the cross to our friends and family. Perhaps you'd pray for inspiration for me to that effect?!

Paul Bev. 28.10.18

14 Wrath on Monday morning

I've read a few more pages through "Recovering the Scandal of the Cross" (p.73) where it quotes Romans 3:20-26
Therefore no-one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Then Baker and Green quote J.I. Packer who, referring to v.25 (underlined) said: "It is the sacrificial death ('blood') of Jesus Christ, God's incarnate Son, that quenches divine anger against sinners, just because Christ's death was a vicarious enduring of the penalty that was our due." Then they quote another author I'd not heard of,

Derek Tidball, saying how the wrath of God against sin exhibits God's personal anger at evil, leading to his punishment of those who commit it.

The authors then go into a very carefully argued discussion of why they disagree with Packer and Tidball's interpretation of that and other passages. I'll spare you that but instead I'll tell you what came to my mind:

Does God get angry? Is he full of wrath at times? Why? What about? Sin? Is he angry with us when we sin?

Then I thought...

Did Jesus get angry? Was he full of wrath at times? Why? What about? Sin? Was he angry with the people around him when they sinned?

Jesus is God, isn't he?! Do we read about Jesus' "anger against sinners" or his "personal anger at evil, leading to [Jesus'] punishment of those who commit it."

OK, who **did** Jesus get angry with? VERY angry? And it wasn't the sinners, the prostitutes, the corrupt tax collectors. He got cross with the religious people who tried to tell people, "This is what you've got to do to please God."

Anyway, continuing their careful argument, Baker and Green say "...how ought we to understand those biblical accounts in which forgiveness is extended **apart from** the satisfaction of wrath (e.g. Luke 7:36-50)?" (my emphasis) So I turned to that passage (a prostitute anoints Jesus' feet) and wept as I read: "Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much." and "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

What glorious, wonderful, incredible news we have to share with our friends and families!

I've already mentioned how Yancey's book starts with a conversation with a prostitute: "Go to church?! Why would I go to church?! I feel bad enough about myself already."

Prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners flocked to Jesus. Do they flock to our churches? If not, why not?!

Paul Bev. 29.10.18

15 And finally

If this is the final episode (but no promises!) then presumably I'm going to reveal 'who dun it' or to tell you 'the answer'. Well, no, sorry, I don't have an answer, but I do know a Man who does. And that is where I'm at now, that is why I'm such a very happy chappy after these two years of exploration and discovery. OK, so what **have** I discovered?

Relationship, Trinity, relationship, community, relationship, love, relationship, reconciliation, relationship, adoption, relationship. And mystery.

Mystery because, after all, this **is** God we're talking about! While it's true that 'all Scripture is inspired...' the Bible doesn't just give us 'the answer' – rather it points us in the right direction, the One who is the way, the truth and the life.

Anyway, I'm happy that I haven't found 'the answer', because I've spent 48 years thinking I was 'getting it right'. The high (low) point of this was my time as a hyper-Pharisee in that sect, where we were so sure we were the only ones who had the true truth, and that the evil people around us were trying to draw us away. I was totally controlled by fear – fear, not love. (I'm comforted that my name-sake, also a hyper-Pharisee, turned out OK in the end.)

My exploration all started with one single sentence at the beginning of a Richard Rohr book: ‘not **propositional** and **transactional**, but *relational* and *mysterious*’. Yes! I said, YES! **Exactly!** I had been taught right from student CU days that there was a set of propositions (e.g. the IVF Statement of Faith) that you had to believe, and then (and only then) you could ‘become a Christian’, ‘pray the prayer’, ‘accept Jesus into your heart’ – all describing the transaction that a person had (or hadn’t) done – what one author describes as ‘binary Christianity’.

So if that’s what I’ve reacted **against** in myself, what’s the positive that I’m moving towards (relational and mysterious)? Let’s take mystery first. There’s no mystery about mystery; it’s just that God is so much ... ‘more’. So at times (and I now have increasingly more time for those times – one of the joys of retirement) I just sit with God, and what an increasing blessing that is.

But the other aspect of mystery is that we’ll never really get to know God, but that’s OK. Faith says, ‘I don’t have all the answers, but I can trust God to reveal what I need to know, when I need to know it.’ But I’m an inquisitive sort, so I keep searching to find out more and more about God, and what I find is good, very good.

So relationship? Well, that’s also part of mystery – the two are strongly linked. But one plus of relationship is the way it helps us in our understanding of Scripture. I believe that this is what Jesus was trying to teach people, despite the Pharisees’ best efforts. The Bible has to be interpreted, whether we’re wondering what it says about long hair, women in church, divorce, chastising children, gender, homosexuality. But I think Jesus’ attitude to Scripture shows us that if our interpretation hinders good relationships, either with God or with one another, then we need to look again at what ‘we’ve always been taught’, and maybe even bring in some of the secular, scientific wisdom that God has, I believe, allowed humankind to build up.

And relationship (and mystery) have affected the way I pray. For years, I’ve really, really struggled with prayer ... so do I now have the answer? No, but prayer is a relationship, not a shopping list that you tick off once God has answered each item. And one big hint as to ‘how to pray’ is ‘**our** Father ... **our** daily bread ... **our** sins ... lead **us** not ...’ But this is very much a work in progress.

What about the people ‘out there’? What does relationship offer them? Today, so many people are lonely, and psychologists tell us that loneliness is the root cause of many other problems, and I’m guessing it affects physical health too. People are in desperate need of a caring community – I think that’s what’s behind the upsurge of things like choirs – and this morning I went to my first ever park run (I say ‘went to’, not ‘went on’, as I was on childcare), and I found it quite moving, seeing all that community spirit. And there are apparently hundreds of these runs, all over the country, every week. Just brilliant! (Sorry, I got distracted. Where was I?) Yes, community. Our churches need to offer welcome, inclusion – on their terms, not ours. Church social events should definitely not (in my view) be opportunities for us to ‘preach the Gospel’!

Sorry, but I get really cross about this: (tell me if I’m wrong but) in our churches we’re told we have to ‘get alongside people’, we’re told we have to ‘pray for six friends’, so that we can have a chance to bring them to church, or to some event, where they can ‘hear the gospel’.

But then what is the ‘gospel’ that we preach; is it ‘good news’? The problem is that we think that to appreciate the good news, people absolutely must first understand the bad news of sin – difficult in a post-Christian society. So what people hear is that we are emphasising the **BAD NEWS: God’s holiness, our sin, our separation, our desperate hell-bound plight without God** ... and then we tell of the GOOD NEWS of God’s wonderful love as takes our sin upon him and dies and is resurrected, thus bringing us back to God, by which time they’ve quite understandably been switched off. As my Mum said repeatedly, whichever church we took her to, ‘Your church is always preaching hellfire and damnation.’ She, and millions like her, never get beyond hearing the bad news, and see us (and God) as judgmental.

I say that she ‘never get beyond’, but I really thank God for ‘Chorlton Good Neighbours’ in Manchester who, on a Tuesday, welcomed Mum into their church on her terms, offering companionship, shared interests – knitting, embroidery, etc. – taking her on outings and doing practical things for her. ‘Joining Good Neighbours was the best thing I ever did!’ she kept saying latterly. And they were absolute saints because Sue’s mother-in-law wasn’t an easy lady! She certainly never understood penal substitution,¹ but I have an inkling that she and I will meet again on that great day!

I trust I haven't upset any of you by my outspokenness. My prayer is that we will all grow in our loving relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that many of those around us will be drawn into that wonderful relationship as a result.

Paul Bev. 3.11.18

¹As I have learnt, penal substitution is just one of a number of possible metaphors for helping us appreciate the wonder and glory of what God in Christ achieved on the cross, so why has it become equated in our minds with 'the Gospel'? How is it that a church can say that this one metaphor should be 'the centre of [a church leader's] theology and ministry'. I think it's because we've lost our emphasis on relationship. Instead, we've 'understood' salvation, and found 'the answer': a simple, individualistic, mechanical view of atonement. (Sorry to go on about it, but it makes me cross.)

16 Creeds as relationship

An enterprising local curate has set up a course about the creeds. I 'accidentally' bumped into Alex (whom we knew from years ago at Holy Trinity), and when he heard about my excitement on 'discovering' the Trinity, he suggested that his course might help my explorations. (*Genius, Alex, thanks! The course is awesome.*)

So, how **do** the creeds help? For the first 400 years, what did the church insist was essential within Christian belief?

The Apostles creed is mainly about affirming what actually happened, especially the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Nicene creed later adds clauses to help us to be sure about the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

There's absolutely **nothing** about atonement – the thing I've been getting so stewed up about!

There's just one oblique reference in the Nicene creed: "For us and for our salvation...", he left heaven, came to earth, had a human conception (so was destined to die physically at some stage), died and rose again.

So why have we got so hung up on the mechanics of atonement? I think it's because we've taken our eyes off the absolutely essential CORE of the Christian faith; we've lost our emphasis on relationship! God IS relationship, so everything is about relationship!

Interestingly, the Nicene creed (see the comparisons below) adds to the Apostles creed more about relationship. For starters, it says "We believe", not "I believe" (maybe echoing "Our Father"?), but mainly it says more about the relationship within the Trinity.

Maybe if we get that right, we wouldn't need all this argument about exactly **how** 'forgiveness of sins' happens?

Maybe we should be concentrating on how we can 'show and tell' people about 'Jesus and the resurrection'.

Maybe we should be concentrating on how we can 'show and tell' people about the absolutely glorious relationship between Jesus (whom people can more easily relate to) and his Father and the Holy Spirit?

Maybe my mother was right after all: we've spent years frightening people into becoming Christians? Maybe we should be welcoming them into a relationship with God – modelling that relationship – rather than insisting that they have to first understand about sin and God's holiness before they can get to heaven?! (We've already decided that it's very difficult to get people to understand that, anyway.)

(I'm not being nasty, but if the only way people can get to heaven is if they follow the formula we insist on, then they are under the control of the church leaders and live in fear – as I did in that sect. But if you start saying “anyone is welcome”, it all gets messy and out of control. ‘Wheat and weeds’, anyone?)

So I think where I've come to is seeing it as a choice between carrot and stick? Is it too simplistic to suggest that the Pharisees were using a stick, warning of the wrath of God, while Jesus came to show them the carrot of God's love?!

Paul Bev. 7.11.18

The Apostles Creed

I believe in God,
the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ,
his only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the
power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into hell.

On the third day he rose again.

He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge
the living and the dead

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.

The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
and of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
one in Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation,
he came down from heaven:

by the power of the Holy Spirit
he was born of the Virgin Mary,
and became man.

For our sake he was crucified
under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered, died, and was buried.

On the third day he rose again
in fulfillment of the Scriptures;

he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the
Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son
he is worshipped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy
catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one
baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.
Amen.

17 What is God really like

What is the predominant image we have of God? What is the predominant image **you** have of God? What is the predominant image **I** have of God?

What is the predominant image of God we get from the OT?

A difficult question because, in an English translation, it's well over half a million words, so I'm asking you to (a) know it well enough and (b) sum it up in a few words!

What is the predominant image of God we get from Jesus' words and actions?

Easier – the Gospels are only 80,000 words.

What is the predominant image of God we get from the rest of the NT?

That's 97,000 words.

Finally, what is the predominant image of God that we project to people around us?

This, in a sense, is what I've been wrestling with these past months, and I do so because I want to follow my namesake – "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some." That is my heart, that is my passion.

For me, now, the predominant image of God is all-loving, better than the very best human father or mother, willing to go to any lengths to heal, to restore, to forgive, to draw us back into that loving relationship that is God, the Holy Trinity. That's why I'm so excited – it's all such good news!

But I hope you've picked up that I still very much see the cross as the centre of all this – probably more so than I ever did – but what is the predominant message of the cross, as presented by 21st century Christians?

God is holy and cannot abide sin. God punishes sin. You are a sinner, so God will punish you, but... Thankfully, God is also all-loving, so he sent Jesus and, as a substitute, Jesus takes the punishment we deserve, so the wrath of God is set aside, and he is then able to accept us into that loving relationship.

If that is 'the gospel', then what is the **predominant** image of God that we are giving to those we love?!

To me, this gives the wrong image of what God is like – a wrathful God seeking someone to punish, and so punishing the Son he loves, instead of punishing us. You can argue the niceties of the theology of this explanation – penal substitution – but to the outsider, it's simple: God is killing his son instead of killing us. How can that possibly be good news?!

I've desperately tried to find a better explanation within the pages of the Bible, but for each model I have looked at, whilst it is clearly there within the Bible, it doesn't give a precise explanation. Take, for example, the idea of redemption, clearly a very biblical image that is used again and again. It sees us as redeemed from the slavery of sin (making a payment to free a slave would be a very contemporary image in NT times), but who paid who? Did God (Jesus) pay the devil? It's an illustration, a metaphor, but it only gives one aspect of the cross – it falls down if you push it too far.

I've struggled to find an explanation that is contemporary! And I've appealed to you, dear readers, to help me find a better, more helpful explanation, but together we've drawn a blank. Indeed, I've been warned about sliding towards universalism (i.e. thinking that everyone will be saved, anyway) and of the danger of preaching 'another gospel' against which my namesake gave some very severe warnings!

But hang on! The idea behind the gospel explanation above (penal substitution) didn't **start** to be talked about by Christians until (I think) the 11th century. So how did they 'make disciples' for the first thousand years or so?!

Then while I was trying to write this essay, I began to wonder if the real problem is that we're trying to actually 'explain' the cross. We think we've got a way of 'explaining' what God did in and through the cross. We've pinned it down to a nice neat tract-shaped package that we can 'present' to people and, as one Christian I worked with on a penal-substitution-based gospel course said, in essence, "We present them with the gospel, and if they reject it, that's their responsibility; ours is just to faithfully present them with the truth."

I started on this journey two years ago when I ‘discovered’ the Trinity – I can remember the very sentence, saying that Christianity shouldn’t be seen as ‘propositional and transactional, but relational and mysterious’.

I think I now have even fewer answers than when I started, but I have a much deeper relationship with God than I ever had; I have a much broader appreciation of what God did in Jesus Christ on the cross ‘for us’; I have concentrated much more on what Jesus actually taught; I can give you several illustrations that show various aspects of what the cross achieved; I no longer feel I have to apologise for any aspect of what God has done in and through the cross.

It’s our Alpha day away tomorrow, and I’m looking forward to seeing how, through the cross, God will redeem people; God will bring them reconciliation with him and with others; God will bring them forgiveness for their sins; God will bring them healing; God will give them victory over Satan; God will give them confidence in his love for them; God will give them strength to face suffering. So many wonderful things, and I’m sure there’s much more that I haven’t yet thought of, and all because God (Jesus) was willing to set aside his rights:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!
(Php 2:6,7)

Hallelujah! What a glorious gospel we have to proclaim!

Paul Bev. 23.11.18

18 More wrath

I was talking this week with a vicar who, like me, has a heart for evangelism. I shared a little of my recent journey and my desire to find a way to put across the good news in a culturally appropriate way, but he insisted that an appreciation of sin and the wrath of God is absolutely fundamental to the ‘good news’. And he warned me against cherry-picking scriptures and thereby not putting across the full truth of what the Bible teaches. Fair enough.

My own gospel teaser (#livingmybestlife), which I put on all my emails, starts from what I think people can relate to – relationship breakdown – and isn’t that the essence of what sin is? But maybe I am dumbing down the gospel to make it more acceptable to my friends and family – which is what, in the nicest possible way, another friend accused me of last year. So what does the Bible teach about God’s wrath?

Over the past months I have tried to squarely face some of the Old Testament ‘wrath of God’ by using the principle of trying to interpret the Scriptures as Jesus did. So where is the wrath of God (the Father) in the life and teaching of Jesus? Here are some notes I made in my search:

- Matthew 3 (+ parallel in Mk & Lk) “‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?’” directed at the Scribes and Pharisees
- Matthew 18 (+ parallel in Mk & Lk) – Jesus has severe warnings (not ‘wrath’, but ‘woe!’ – similar) for “‘If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin” and “‘...things that cause people to sin ... woe to the man through whom they come!’” and God’s anger is shown as “‘This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.’”
- Matthew 23 (whole chapter!) (+ Mk & Lk) “‘whitewashed tombs” etc. Scribes and Pharisees
- Mark 3 – anger against those who said it was against God’s law to heal on the Sabbath
- Mark 11 (+ Mt, Lk, Jn) – cleansing the temple – anger for those who pervert the worship of God

• Jn 3:36 “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”

That last one looks a bit more like what my vicar friend wanted me to talk about with non-Christians, but that wrath is the result of rejecting Jesus, not of ‘sinning’ (= doing bad things).

So I don’t have any problem at all with any wrath that Jesus expresses, but what about the rest of the New Testament?

My ‘wrath’ search went straight from John to Romans 1:18. My NIV heads that passage: “God’s Wrath against Mankind”. Ah yes, isn’t this the bit about God’s wrath against people involved in ‘sexual impurity’, ‘shameful lusts’ and ‘wickedness, greed, depravity ... envy, murder, strife’?!

Hang on, let’s be a little careful. There’s only one reference to ‘wrath’ in Romans 1: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who *suppress the truth* by their wickedness.” This is sounding a little more like what Jesus kept saying, that the wrath of God is revealed against those who cause others to stumble.

Immediately following Romans 1 is Romans 2(!); what’s more, it starts with a ‘therefore’, so it must be read **with** Romans 1, and chapter 2 has *three* ‘wrath’s and one ‘anger’ in the first eight verses! But look at v.1: “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else.” Who is the ‘you’? Well, I guess it’s the Roman Christians.

But I think they have been *set up* by the wily Paul! He’s used chapter 1 to tempt them into saying, “Yes, yes, Paul, you’re absolutely right! Look at all those terrible things that ‘they’ do!” And then he clobbers them with his “therefore” – God’s *wrath and anger is directed at Christians*: “But because of your stubbornness and your *unrepentant* heart, you are storing up **wrath** against yourself for the day of God’s **wrath**, when his **righteous judgment** will be revealed.” Ouch!

I have come to the conclusion that the main thrust of Romans 1-3 is **not** that “mankind is intrinsically evil and is therefore under God’s wrath”, despite the NIV’s heading, “God’s Wrath against Mankind”.

Rather, I think it’s more like: Yes, we all know there’s a lot of evil in the world, and God knows too, and he won’t let the evil go unpunished. **But** God (a.k.a. Jesus) is very, **very** angry when **you**, as a Christian, are self-righteous and, by misappropriating the truth, turn other people away from God.

But am I cherry-picking? What about the rest of the New Testament? Apart from Revelation, all the remaining ‘wrath’ is in Paul’s epistles. I haven’t studied those references in detail, but after my experience in his first epistle, I’m very wary of insisting that God’s wrath is an essential element in any presentation of the gospel. (And my work on understanding Paul’s teaching in Romans 1-3 is ongoing; once again Brad Jersak’s ‘A more Christ-like God’ is proving really helpful.)

What about repentance? I think it’s the same story as in Romans 1-2: it was mainly Israel that was called to repent – i.e. those who already believed in God, but had got a distorted view of what God is really like. Yes, of course, everyone needs to ‘re-think’ (= repent), but God’s anger is against me if I’m actively turning people (e.g. my own family) away from God by portraying him as a God who is angry when they ‘do wrong things’.

Well, what about fire and brimstone? Is that biblical? Sweeping statement, but no, I can’t see that in the Scriptures either, well, not against people who do wrong things.

I’m moving (nay, I have moved) to a very different view of what the gospel actually is... but more of that anon.

19 What is the gospel?

How would you answer the question: *What is the gospel?* As my spiritual journey has continued, it has just struck me that maybe ‘the gospel’, is quite simply a person – Jesus Christ. Certainly, the good news that struck me so powerfully two years ago (as I have probably said ad nauseam) is that God is Trinity; God is relationship; God is love; and that we are able to be part of that relationship. Could there be any better or more wonderful good news (gospel) than that?!

Now, part of my journey was a ‘chance meeting’ with our friend Alex, now a curate, who told me that his church was running a course about the church’s creeds. (Yawn!) *Au contraire!* It has been fascinating and exciting and enlightening and life-affirming.

What was the point of the creeds? It was to **guard the gospel**; it was to make sure, in the first centuries of the church’s life, that the **essential elements of the gospel** were preserved. What were those essential elements? They were (and are) the historic facts about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – ‘for us’ – and about the relationships between the persons of the Trinity.

That for me is the gospel, the good news – end of story.

So here’s my latest attempt to ‘share the gospel’ with my friends, family, editing colleagues or total strangers who happen upon my website. Please, please feed back to me if you think it can be improved in any way! Thanks.

#livingmybestlife

The thing that gives me most joy in my life is the relationships I have with people around me. But when those relationships go wrong, seriously wrong, life can be absolute hell. And when relationships between groups and nations go wrong, the scale of that hell can be massive.

Why do we inflict such pain on each other? Is it because we’re unintelligent and haven’t worked out how to avoid doing so? Clearly not! Just look around at some of our incredible scientific discoveries and technological achievements – mind-blowing!

The problem with relationships is not *knowledge* but *motivation*. For example, we all know that good diet and exercise are key to good health, but somehow it’s easier not to bother. It was only when I discovered that I had heart disease that I was motivated to make the necessary changes.

If we’re honest, what really motivates us, at individual, corporate and national level, is self-interest. But then again, is ‘getting what we want’ *really* what makes us happy? Is it what make *you* happy? Is it what make *me* happy?

Am I being unrealistic about myself? Arrogant, even? I’m not sure, but what I *think* makes me really happy is doing things for and with other people.

Now, just suppose for a minute that there’s a God. Suppose it’s a **good** God, and not the type of God who sits in heaven telling us what to do and what not to do, and zapping us if we don’t do what he says. Wouldn’t such a **good** God try to help us in our relationships with one another?!

There was a man once who had something to say about this. He lived about 2000 years ago in a place in Palestine called Nazareth, though in fact he was born in Bethlehem and then spent his first few years as a refugee in Egypt.

At the age of about 30, he started wandering around Palestine talking to people about God, and it was as if he knew God personally – he talked about God as his loving father. People found this really attractive and huge crowds came to listen to him. What’s more, many people said that they had been healed by Jesus from all sorts of diseases.

Unfortunately, Jesus was much too outspoken. He was quite rude about the religious leaders, saying that they had a totally wrong idea of what God was like – saying that God would smite us if we did thing wrong. Somewhat weirdly, Jesus said that if they wanted to know what God was like, they should look at him: “If you’ve seen me, you have seen the Father.”

The religious leaders really angry, and they tried to stone him, saying “You, a mere man, are claiming to be God!” Later, they tried to push him off a cliff, and it just got worse; eventually they persuaded the Roman authorities that he was a political troublemaker, and he was crucified.

Of course, when Jesus was killed, his followers were totally devastated. But fast forward a few weeks, and clearly something dramatic has happened. They’re going around telling everyone that Jesus has come back to life! And they’re doing so with incredible boldness, risking their lives.

So what’s going on here? After cowering behind locked doors, they are now publically saying that “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact” and “Jesus, whom you crucified, God has made both Lord and Christ.”

They are also saying that Jesus has gone back to be with his Father in heaven, and that the Father has sent the Holy Spirit to actually live *within* them – yes, the God who created the whole universe can actually live inside us! Astonishing claims, and the Christian faith then spread around the known world.

So, Jesus claimed to be God, and now the disciples are saying that God, as the Holy Spirit, can live inside us: God the Father, God the Son and now God the Holy Spirit. Confusing or what?!

No, I can’t **explain** this, but it tells me that God **IS** love; by definition, in essence, God **IS** loving relationship. What’s more, we’re invited to be a part of that loving relationship. That’s what transforms people’s lives and motivates them to love and serve others, even their enemies, despite the suffering that can come. That’s what has hit me so powerfully, after 50 years as a Christian.

So if God is like what Jesus is like, and not the toxic image of God that many of us have grown up with, maybe that invites further investigation. You might like to read one of the Gospels to see what Jesus did and said. (Mark’s Gospel is short enough to read right through in an evening.)

My prayer is that you’ll discover the amazing love that God has for you!

Paul Bev. 3.12.18

20 Thy will be done

As a kid, I was obsessed with knowing how things work – hence my engineering background and hence why I’m so happy now at being paid to read books about ‘how things work’.

I’ve already confessed how I’ve found prayer difficult over the past decade. For my first 40 years as a Christian it was less of a problem; I had file cards listing different circles of contacts and concerns, using one card a day. A bit mechanical, but it seemed to work.

But I did have issues with prayer. For example, thousands of people all over the world prayed for David Watson’s healing, and he died. These days we get prayer alerts by mobile/email, so huge numbers of people pray about something. Why? What’s the point? What does it achieve?

Another issue for me was ‘shopping list praying’ – intercessory prayer meetings where we maybe didn’t even bother to say ‘Hello’ to God before we listed all the things we wanted him to do.

So a stage on my journey was to decide that prayer should be more about listening to God to find out what he wants, rather than telling him what we want. I’ve found that really freeing, and I bless God for using Sue and Colin and others to teach me the value of silent prayer. I sometimes sit in silence, noting down things like ‘buy All Bran’, if they come to mind, quickly returning to silence, or the names of people to pray for. Then I come back later to actually intercede for them.

But something has occurred to me which, assuming I’m right in my thinking, might be helpful.

Thinking about suffering and an almighty God: God is loving and he creates us in love, and by the nature of love, real love, he allows us to choose our own path. So that means some suffering is quite simply our fault. However, in the face of innocent suffering, say natural disasters, we might say that either (1) God really is almighty but is heartless because he doesn’t prevent it, or (2) he’s loving, but he’s not really almighty.

What if, in love, God chooses to submit to the natural order, allowing tectonic plates to keep moving in sudden violent jumps, rather than putting in some WD40 to make them move slowly. That means that he has allowed the world to be ‘subject to decay’.

To go back to (intercessory) prayer, might the Lord’s prayer be of some help? When first at St Ed’s I was struck that they seem to use the Lord’s prayer at every end and turn. I confess that I thought it a bit OTT. I now repent; that prayer has gained hugely in significance for me.

Jesus taught us ‘**when** we pray’ to say ‘they **will** be done’. Now I used to think that was a bit pointless, if I was honest: if God is almighty then his **will** is going to be done regardless, isn’t it?! But what did Jesus say? ‘For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the **will** of him who sent me.’ (Jn 6:38) and very pertinently, ‘Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my **will**, but yours be done.’ Lk 22:42.

OK, there are passages that seem to say that, by praying, people have encouraged God to change his mind, but maybe prayer isn’t about getting God to do things, but about Christians cooperating so that God’s will *is* done on earth, as it is in heaven?

Paul Bev. 7.12.18

21 *livingmybestlife*

#livingmybestlife

The thing that gives me most joy in my life is the relationships I have with people around me. But when those relationships go wrong, seriously wrong, life can be absolute hell. And I believe that loneliness is a very serious problem today that can affect our mental and physical health.

But when relationships go wrong between groups and nations, the scale of that hell can be massive.

So why do we inflict such pain on each other? Is it because we’re unintelligent and haven’t worked out how to avoid doing so? Clearly not! Just look around at some of our incredible scientific discoveries and technological achievements – mind-blowing!

The problem with relationships is not *knowledge* but *motivation*. For example, we all know that good diet and exercise are key to good health, but somehow it’s easier not to bother. It was only when I discovered that I had heart disease that I was motivated to make the necessary changes.

If we’re honest, what really motivates us, at individual, corporate and national level, is self-interest. But is ‘getting what we want’ *really* what makes us happy? Is it what makes *you* happy? Is it what makes *me* happy?

Am I being unrealistic about myself? Arrogant, even? I’m not sure, but what I *think* makes me really happy is doing things for and with other people.

Now, just suppose for a minute that there's a God. Suppose it's a **good** God, and not the type of God who just sits in heaven telling us what to do and what not to do, and zapping us if we don't do it. Wouldn't a **good** God try to help us in our relationships with one another?!

There was a man once who had something to say about this. He lived about 2000 years ago in Palestine, in a place called Nazareth – though in fact he was born in Bethlehem and then spent his first few years as a refugee in Egypt.

At the age of about 30, he started wandering around Palestine talking to people about God, and it was as if he knew God personally – he talked about God as his loving father. People found this really attractive and huge crowds came to listen to him. What's more, many people said that they had been healed by Jesus from all sorts of diseases.

Unfortunately, Jesus was much too outspoken. He was quite rude about the religious leaders, saying that they had a totally wrong idea of what God was like. Somewhat weirdly, Jesus said that if they wanted to know what God was really like, they should look at him: "If you've seen me, you have seen the Father," he said.

The religious leaders got really angry, and tried to stone him, saying "You, a mere man, are claiming to be God!" Eventually they persuaded the Roman authorities that he was a political troublemaker, and he was crucified.

Of course, when Jesus was killed, his followers were totally devastated. But fast forward a few weeks, and clearly something dramatic has happened. They're going around telling everyone that Jesus has come back to life! And they're doing so with incredible boldness, risking their lives.

What's going on here? After cowering behind locked doors, they are now publically saying that "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact" and "Jesus, whom you crucified, God has made both Lord and Christ."

They are also saying that Jesus has gone back to be with his Father in heaven, and the Father has sent the Holy Spirit to live *inside* them – yes, God who created the whole universe actually living inside us! Astonishing claims, and the Christian faith then spread around the known world.

So, Jesus claimed to be God, and now the disciples are saying that God, as the Holy Spirit, can live inside us: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Confusing or what?!

No, I can't **explain** this, but it tells me that God **IS** love. By definition, in essence, God **IS** loving relationship. What's more, we're invited to be a part of that loving relationship. That's what transforms people's lives and motivates them to love and serve others, even their enemies, despite the suffering that can come. That's what has hit me so powerfully, after 50 years as a Christian.

So if God is like what Jesus is like, and not the toxic image of God that many of us have grown up with, maybe that invites further investigation. You might like to read one of the Gospels to see what Jesus did and said. (Mark's Gospel is short enough to read right through in an evening.)

My prayer is that you'll discover the amazing love that God has for you!

Paul Bev. 3.12.18

Part 2 – How can I enter into this relationship?

If after reading a Gospel or two, you're attracted to the God that Jesus tells us about, you might want to think about how you can get to know him personally – to enter into the sort of relationship that I have found so life-affirming and life-transforming.

Well, the Gospels will have given you all the basic elements you need to know – the life, death, resurrection and ascension into heaven of Jesus Christ – but if you also read the first two chapters of Acts, you'll then know a bit about how the Holy Spirit comes to live in people's lives.

When two people get married in Church, someone will probably offer them some 'marriage preparation'. Sure, they love each other madly, deeply, but before they make a lifelong commitment to one another, they need to understand how that relationship can work, and they need to be realistic about themselves.

I think the same is true if we want a relationship with God – we need to understand about how that relationship can work, and we need to be realistic about ourselves.

God only, ever, always loves us madly, deeply, and through the whole of the Old Testament and into the New Testament, God has pursued us humans, trying to get us to come into relationship with him, but all the time we say, "Thanks, but no, I'd rather live life in my own way."

God's response is to allow us freedom of choice, but he warns us, "If you don't live in relationship with me, it will all go horribly wrong!" And it does. The result is that we mess up our own lives and we mess up each other's lives. This is what the Bible refers to as 'sin'.

We read in the New Testament how God continues to pursue us in love, actually coming, himself, into our world as a vulnerable human being. Jesus tells us – and shows us – how wonderful it is to live in a loving relationship with God the Father. What happens? We kill God! He's the only man who has ever lived a perfect life... and we kill him.

But then God raises Jesus from the dead; God, in Jesus, destroys death and sin and has complete victory over it, and he offers to give us victory over sin and death too.

How does that actually work? How does Jesus' death and resurrection make all things new and restore our relationship with God? The Bible gives us clues, but it's a mystery; I can't explain it –but neither can I 'explain' God! However, it's what billions of Christians have believed and experienced for over 2000 years. That's why, worldwide, the church is still flourishing.

So, to make it personal, talk to God – tell him what you feel. If you feel that life has abused you, tell him so (he understands – Jesus was abused bigtime!); if you realise that you've abused other people in any way, admit it to him; and tell him that you'd like to know his wonderful love in your life.

Maybe you could say something like "God, if you're real, please come and live inside me. If you do, I'll do my best to get to know you better day by day and help others to know your love too."

But there's no special formula – just tell God, honestly, how you feel, and ask him to help you. He will, trust me! Well, don't trust me, trust yourself to the God you've seen as you've read about Jesus of Nazareth.

And find someone you know who is a Christian (me, even) and tell them that you want a relationship with God through Jesus, and they'll do their best to help and encourage you in your new-found faith.

May God bless you as you get to know him better!

Paul Bev. 9.12.18

| <h2 style="background-color: yellow; display: inline;">22a Gospel_in_chairs_script</h2> | Actions |
|--|---|
| <p>Text – The gospel in chairs</p> <p><i>There's a way of summarizing the gospel that we'd like to show you; it's been around for a few years, and it's called 'The gospel in chairs'. It's something that we found on a YouTube video. It was based on a presentation of the gospel suggested by Brad Jersak, in his book A more Christ-like God, but Brad says it was an orthodox priest who suggested it originally.</i></p> <p><i>And so we would like to just give you a visual representation of the gospel in chairs that we've learned. Here's what we'd like to do: we'd like to walk through the basics of the gospel. There's so much we could say, but we just want to walk through the very basics of the gospel... visually... twice. We're going to do it two slightly different ways. The first time through, we'll try and highlight key aspects of the gospel that many of us have heard repeated throughout our lives.</i></p> <p><i>And there's much beauty and much truth in the first way the gospel is presented. But we think there's also some things that could perhaps be miscommunicated. And maybe we can do a better job – a more biblical job – by addressing some of those issues. So we will walk through it a second time and try to make those adjustments. Are you ready? Here's the first version.</i></p> <p>In the beginning, God... created the world...</p> <p>and he created us in his image and in his likeness. And God – who is love – desired nothing more than to have a face-to-face love relationship with his image-bearers.</p> <p>But God – who is love – knows that love is a choice, and so he invested in us the real, actual freedom to choose, but with laid-out options as to whether we want to remain in intimate relationship with him or to walk away from that.</p> <p>But we chose to turn our back on God and to go our own way. And we sinned in Adam and Eve and then in Cain and Abel... And in generation after generation around the world, we have chosen the way of sin. And God who is not only love but is also a holy and righteous judge, too pure and too holy to look upon sin, turned his back to us.</p> <p>And we were under the condemnation of God, who is our source of life.</p> <p>But God is not just condemnation and judgement; he is not just a holy and righteous judge; he is a loving father and so he sent Jesus.</p> <p>And Jesus came to Earth and became one of us. He took on our flesh. And he not only took on our flesh but he showed us what a perfect human life was designed to be.</p> <p>Eventually, on the cross, he took on our sin. And in so doing, he also took on the wrath of God who turned his back on his son. And Jesus not only took on the sins of the world, but he took on the wrath of the Father and then died...</p> <p>...but rose again to put that wrath aside.</p> <p>Now Jesus not only changes our hearts...</p> <p>...Jesus has also changed the heart of the Father...</p> | <p><i>Raise the G chair</i></p> <p><i>Raise the H chair</i></p> <p><i>Turn chairs face to face</i></p> <p><i>Turn H away from G</i></p> <p><i>Turn G away from H (back to back)</i></p> <p><i>Sit in H</i></p> <p><i>Raise arms in cross shape</i></p> |

– as we sometimes sing, “On the cross when Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied”.

So God has vented his wrath on Christ, and he can now relate to us in mercy.

That was the gospel round one. Did you recognise much of it? Those of you who have grown up in the church will certainly have heard it this way.

But maybe some things can be improved on. So let’s try again...

In the beginning God... created the world...

and he created us in his image and in his likeness. And God – who is love – desired nothing more than to have a face-to-face love relationship with his image-bearers.

But God – who is love – knows that love is a choice, and so he invested in us the real, actual freedom to choose to love him back or to go our own way. And we chose to go our own way, in the garden, with Cain and Abel and in generation after generation... and when we made that choice... God... *[pause]*

... pursued us.

He came looking for us in the garden.

He came looking for Cain after he killed Abel and he said to him, “I’ll protect you from other people’s vengeance.”

He came looking for the children of Israel. And even when we turned our back on him again...

...**God** came again and said, “I will give you laws to guide you. I will give you directions to lead you back towards holiness.”

And **we** said we prefer the golden calf.

And **God** said, “I will send you prophets who will teach you, who will call you.”

And **we** said no.

And **God** said, “I’ll put you in captivity, not just to punish you, but so that you will grow thirsty for more of me.”

We said no.

Hang head

Stand up again

*Turn **H** back to **G***

*Turn **G** back to **H***

*Raise the **G** chair*

*Raise the **H** chair*

Turn chairs face to face

*Turn **H** away from **G***

*Take **G**, raise it high over **H** and place it so as to face **H**.*

*Turn **H** away*

*Take **G** high over **H** again.*

*Turn **H** away*

And God kept coming to us again and again. And we kept turning away until finally, because he loves us, at the right time he sent his son, Jesus, to come to Earth and become one of us, to live as the perfect man among us.

[with growing excitement...]

Not since Adam had the universe ever seen a perfect human being, and he was freaky! He taught us how to love, not only God but our neighbours; and to love ourselves; and even to love our enemies; they learned to see the value and worth in all people.

Jesus lived a life that rebuked religion but welcomed every sinner who felt they were outside of God's reach. He never pushed them away in judgement; he always pulled them close.

And then... after he had reached out to a woman at a well who was Samaritan and said, "I can't believe you're talking to me." And he said, "I'm not here to judge you; I'm here to reveal myself to you."...

...and after he had talked to Zacchaeus, a tax collector, whom the whole town despised, but Jesus said, "I want to come to your house. Let's hang out together." He front-end loaded acceptance, and that led to Zacchaeus's repentance...

...and after he talked to a woman who had been caught in adultery and was expecting to be stoned, and he said "Neither do I condemn you; your accusers are gone." He protects her from them. And then he says, "I don't condemn you. Go and sin no more." And notice the order of that: "Neither do I condemn you, *now*, go and sin no more." And notice that he doesn't add, "Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more... ..or then I really *will* condemn you."

This front-end-loaded acceptance and forgiveness just flows out of his life. And we can't handle it... we don't know what to do with it, and it's threatening to our religious institutions that are predicated on an eternal insecurity in our relationship with God.

Until, finally, we crucify him.

And we pour out **our** wrath on Christ while the Father looks on and expresses his love and his reconciliation through Jesus. And Jesus dies.

but he rises again

and calls us into a relationship with a father who has always been the Prodigal Son's father longing for us to come home.

This is God's disposition towards you.

And it doesn't stop there.

He promises not just to be a God who will live **with** us but he wants to live **in** us and us in him. He gives us his Holy Spirit, and together we do life.

This is really, really good news!

Take G over H

Turn H away

Take G over H

Turn H away

Sit in H

Raise arms in cross shape

Hang head

Stand up

| | |
|--|---|
| | <p><i>Reach out arms of welcome</i></p> <p><i>Turn H to face the front</i></p> <p><i>Take G, lift it up and place it on top of H</i></p> |
|--|---|

23 Does God ever get angry?

Having realised the wonder that God is Father, Son and Spirit, living together in wonderful love, and found such amazing joy in being invited into that love, a while ago I started to question about what is God like. Does God ever get angry? Does God ever send people to hell?

So I tried this argument: Imagine if I had the best parent there could ever be. Would my 100% perfect mother, say, ever get angry with me, her child? Even if I did and said some terrible things to her, could she, would she, ever get angry, if she had perfect love for me?

More recently, I've come to orient my thinking around Jesus' words, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father". If I want to know what God is like then, supremely and wonderfully, I can look at the Word made flesh, who dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Life-changing!

So did Jesus ever get angry? When people did and said terrible things to him, did he ever get angry? Yes, he got angry, but only with the Scribes and Pharisees, and that was because they were telling lies about God and stopping people experiencing God's love.

And when we face God in judgement, will we experience his anger if we don't believe? Will my own children and grandchildren face God's anger if they don't believe?! Sorry, I don't believe so.

Am I becoming a universalist? No! God, who is love, wants to relate to us in love, so he gives us – love *has* to give us – freedom to choose. And if that choice is real, there's the possibility that we'll reject God's offer, Jesus' offer, of life. And God, in love, will respect that choice.

So how will God feel if I stand before him and reject him? Surely, he'll feel pain, the terrible pain that only real love can feel. Will there be even the faintest hint of anger? I don't believe so.

Then where did we get the idea that "God will punish us for our sins", an essential element of our traditional preaching of the gospel? Is that what the Bible really teaches, or just what we have always been taught. I'm not theologically trained (which is why I've sent this to a few other folk who are), but I've done a word search of the New Testament on 'punish', and apart from apocalyptic writings, all I can find is the Pharisees getting it in the neck from Jesus.

So, please tell me, where does God/Jesus ever say, "I will, literally, punish you for your sins" or "I will, literally, exclude you from heaven if you don't believe in me"? Yes, it's there as a metaphorical idea, but that has to be understood in the light of the overwhelming torrent of God's love expressed in Jesus.

OK, if we don't believe in Jesus, we will be punishing *ourselves*, and excluding *ourselves* from heaven, but unless anyone can show me any Scriptures to the contrary, I can't and won't preach the good news to my friends and family that's predicated on the idea that we are under God's curse. [I've just done a search on 'curse' – identical result to 'punish'!] And if I'm right, could we have been preaching 'another gospel' and are thereby in danger of 'God's curse' as Paul says?

24 Communication

Staying at the house of Bryan & Mary Ashton (greetings to those of you who know them!), I woke at 5, started thinking, and couldn't get back to sleep, so here I am, yet again!

My last essay produced quite a few responses, some saying, effectively, "Yes, you were right to be concerned, because you're wrong in your interpretation of Scripture." But when they explained why I was wrong, my immediate response was, "Where did that come from? That wasn't what I was saying!"

I have chatted with a few of you face to face, and that's much safer, less likely for there to be misunderstandings. And we all know how dangerous emails and Facebook posts can be! OK that's partly because we can all too easily send emails without thinking carefully what we're saying, but even with care, written communication can be misunderstood, because we don't always know 'where the person is coming from'.

Much more importantly, how does God communicate with us about what he is like?

¹ In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

(Wow! What an amazing few verses! I pulled them up, having had the phrase 'spoken to us by his Son' in mind and was wanting to quote it, but those verses just scintillated, as I re-read them!)

All words are pictures, metaphors; they aren't the real thing but are attempts to communicate about the real thing, and they have to be interpreted. But when we see what the Son is like, we see what the Father is really like. Thank God for providing Jesus!

So where I have come to is that if God has communicated to us in Jesus, then I have to interpret God's written communication in the light of what Jesus is like. If my interpretation of Scripture is contrary to the character of Jesus, then my interpretation is wrong.

Yesterday I met with an Iranian Christian, a refugee from a Muslim background who had come to faith in Jesus in Germany, with a view to encouraging one another week by week as we chat about the faith.

It was fascinating to look at the Christian faith from the viewpoint of someone from a totally different culture. He was impressed about what good people Christians are – which was encouraging – and also how we are allowed to question our beliefs. "We could *never* do that. The mullah wouldn't allow it." But he did also say, "Some Christians are very straight," which, after discussion, I took to mean dogmatic.

I also explained to him (briefly!) about the Catholic church and the Reformation, and then tried to explain why there are so many different churches today. Thinking about it afterwards, what an absolute scandal it is that we have wasted so much time arguing about the finer details of what we believe and how we organise our churches, each church insisting that their way is 'based on Scripture'.

So am I arguing against myself? Am I wasting my time (and wasting your time, sorry) on the finer points of what I believe. That is certainly not my intention. I'm arguing for a catholicisation of the faith (That's a small 'c'!). I'm arguing against the view that says "**The** way to understand what Jesus did on the cross is this..."

We can all, hopefully, agree with what is in the creeds, none of which actually says **how** Jesus died for our sins, but in different cultures, different of the Bible's metaphors for the efficacy of the cross will be more or less helpful or understandable.

What woke me up this morning (well, what kept me awake after my bladder had woken me) was thinking about ‘the wages of sin’, which is what one of you quoted to me vis a vis ‘wrath’. So I checked online, and here’s the first website I saw (my italic):

What’s the meaning of the phrase ‘The wages of sin is death’?
Sinners will be cast [*implied: by God*] into everlasting torment.

We might want to say, “No! It’s not **God** that’s bringing death; by that phrase, Paul meant that the natural **consequence** of sin was death”, and we might want to quote the rest of the sentence about the free gift of God, but the damage has already been done: “God is someone who throws people into hell. That’s what all Christians believe, right? End of story!”

No, no, no, no! Jesus’ wrath was reserved for (i.e. God’s wrath is reserved for) (1) those who actively reject him (2) those who prevent other people from knowing his love by presenting a distorted image of what God is like. And it was (2) that has caused me to repent these past two years.

Paul Bev. 15.12.18

25 I thank God for the creeds

Praise God for the creeds!

Who would have thought that a course about the creeds <yawn!> could be so transformational! God is using it (and other influences, of course) to change my whole view of God, of life, and probably of myself eventually – but then we’ve only had four sessions so far – two more to go.

(I don’t want to rush you, Alex, but when is this course going to be available as a book, so that more people can have their faith deepened and renewed?!)

The course, thus far, has been almost exactly parallel to my own journey. It all started when I discovered something about the nature of God: [as I’ve said, ad nauseam] the fundamental nature of God is relationship. The fact that God is three persons in one being is totally and utterly fundamental to our faith. And we can enter into that love. Amazing!

He is by nature, in and of himself, **love**. And that only works if not only *God the Father* but also *God the Son* and *God the Holy Spirit* is, are, always have been, always will be, by nature God. Full stop.

Then **out of** that love, because God **is** love, he did something, he chose to do something; he didn’t have to but he did – he created! And that which he chose to create – the glorious universe, including us – he created in order that we could share in that love.

But as we know, love is not love without choice, and so it all went horribly pear-shaped because we chose well, you know all that stuff! So what’s the solution?

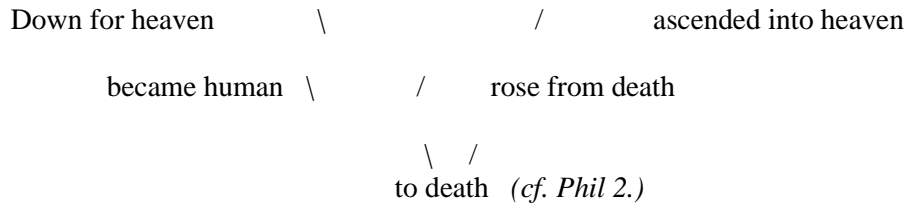
And this has been the second major stage in my journey. The **how** of salvation (but see below).

My unhappiness with the way that the solution has always been presented (well, since the days of Calvin?) is that it is seen as a mechanism, a transaction. I’m not saying that penal substitution is wrong, per se, but that it too easily turns the gospel into: God is angry with you, but he won’t be angry if you accept Jesus as your personal saviour.

In sum, the gospel has become all about **us** – worse still, it’s all about **me**! It’s about whether I will accept Jesus and therefore go to heaven, or reject him and go to hell.

So as an antedote, here are my notes from Alex’s session on the ‘Jesus became incarnate’ bit of the course on the creeds [bits in sq. brackets are my later additions!]:

- It's only **because** Jesus is God that he can be our saviour.
- The important question is not “What is salvation?” but “Who is our saviour?”
- The trajectory of Jesus in the creeds is [*please add arrowheads to those lines so they go down and then up again*]:



- Jesus shared **all** we are so we can share in his glory! [in all his glory?]
- Why did Jesus become human? [the creeds only say] “For us and for our salvation”
- The person and work of Jesus are **inseparable**.
- Salvation is the exchange – his life for ours
- Jesus became all **we** are and returned it to the Father [so that we can become all **He** is?]
- **Salvation IS the person of Jesus**

What I said early was wrong: what really, really matters is not the **HOW** of salvation; it's the **WHO** of salvation.

So my efforts at sharing the gospel will henceforth focus on relationships as the link-point with not-yet-believers, then the narrative of Jesus' birth, death, (claimed) resurrection and ascension as the continuation, and when they show signs of positive interest, I'll suggest they bypass me and talk directly to God.

If you're interested, I'll let you know how that works out in practice.

Paul Bev. 28.12.18

26 Back to Adam and Eve

I've never really thought about this before, but you know, in the garden, where God said not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? What's wrong with that anyway?! If we **don't** know what's right and wrong then we'll end up saying and doing things that will hurt others, hurt God, even! Surely, it's very important to know what's right and wrong, isn't it?

But maybe it's because Adam and Eve had a relationship with God, and while an important spin-off from a relationship with God is knowing right from wrong, fundamentally, a relationship is not about right and wrong. Relationship is not about whose 'fault' something is. It's about living in a trusting relationship – saying 'sorry', but letting it go and moving on.

So Adam and Eve have a decision to make – that fruit looks **really** nice! Should we...? Then along comes Satan, and what's his tactic? First, **doubt**: “Did God really say...?” He wants us to doubt God's love for us. Doubt is a

killer for relationships – if we doubt God, we are saying we don't trust him, and relationships **must** be based on trust.

Then, **literalism**. Yes, OK, in a sense, Satan was telling the truth. God **did** say, “in the day you eat of it you will surely die”, and Satan knew that, no, Adam and Eve wouldn't drop down dead if they ate the apple, but the point was that while God was using those words to convey an important truth: he was using ‘die’ in a metaphorical sense, but Satan took it literally. So, he told them “You will not surely die”, i.e. “you won't drop down dead” ... but that was a distortion of the truth because it wasn't what God **meant**.

But then, as soon as we start focusing on right and wrong, rather than developing a trusting relationship, we end up with blame and shame. What a mess we've made!

Adam and Eve got their way of thinking horribly wrong: focusing on what's right and what's wrong is the death of relationship.

Zoom forward to Jesus' day. Whose fault was it (Lk 13) when the tower of Siloam fell and killed people or (Jn 9) the man was born blind? No, says Jesus, you're not thinking straight: “Unless you repent, you too will all perish.” (OK, he didn't mean literally die [perish], of course, but that's not my point here.) What struck me was that ‘repent’ here meant that they needed to change their way of thinking (metanoia). You won't be able have a relationship with God if you're always thinking of blame and shame.

They got their way of thinking horribly wrong: focusing on what's right and what's wrong is the death of relationship.

Zoom forward to today (albeit with a bit of caricature)...

Some say, if you follow these biblical principles <proof texts supplied> then God will bless you with spiritual and material blessings.

Some say, if you follow these biblical principles <proof texts supplied> then God will heal you, even from incurable diseases.

Some say, if you understand and follow these biblical principles <proof texts supplied> you'll realise that the only way your sins can be forgiven is this (one explanation of the way of salvation).

We've got our way of thinking horribly wrong: focusing on know what's right and what's wrong is the death of relationship.

No! I'm not saying we shouldn't bother thinking. No! I'm not saying we shouldn't study our Bibles. No, I'm not saying “All you need is love...” And yes, we do need to think about what's right and wrong in certain situations, but the motive has to be **trying to please the one we love**, and not working out the exact parameters of perfect behaviour – we can leave that to the Pharisees!

I've been thinking and reading my Bible more than ever before – I can't **stop** thinking about it, as you may well have noticed! But I'm doing it because I'm in love with the one who inspired it, not solely in order to decide right from wrong, and **certainly** not to decide how other people should behave. That's **definitely** something I can leave to the Pharisees of this world.

In diagram form:

As in Adam all die

FALL
(turn away from God)

Relationship → “Focusing purely on behaviour”

so in Christ shall all be made alive

REPENT

(turn back towards God)

“Focusing purely on behaviour” → Relationship

In this past wonderful two years, I think I’ve repented, I’ve changed my mind, big-time. After 48 years of worrying about knowing what’s ‘right’, I’ve found a God who looks more like Jesus, and I’ve started to really enjoy being part of God’s family. And it’s glorious!

Paul Bev. 2.1.19

27 “Repent, for the end of the world is nigh!”

How do you feel when you see this on a sandwich board or on an advert in the underground? I’m afraid it makes me very cross because it reinforces people’s negative stereotypes of Christians as always going on about sin and hell and judgement.

But doesn’t the Bible say we should repent? Yes, absolutely! And not just the Bible as a whole, but Jesus’ *very own words*, specifically – “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near”. And for those who heard it (well, not for the Pharisees!) it was very Good News!

To see why it was such good news, we need to look at what Jesus meant, but we have a problem: Jesus didn’t actually say ‘Repent’, did he? He wasn’t English, remember. He said (so I’m told),

Μετανοεῖτε ἥγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν

(Isn’t the internet a wonderful thing?!)

The important point is that he used the verb ‘metanoia’, which our Bibles tend to translate as ‘repent’. So what does ‘repent’ mean in English? OED: *feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one’s wrongdoing or sin.*

I know that Wikipedia isn’t always right, but I looked up ‘metanoia’, and it seems very clear that the above definition is **not** what Jesus meant. We just don’t have a suitable word in English. Drat!

So what does metanoia mean? Here are a couple of quotes:

“In early Christianity... [metanoia] ...was used consistently ... to express a fundamental change in thinking that leads to a fundamental change in behavior and/or way of living.”

“In 2006, an ecumenical group of scholars published a study of repentance in the Bible and the Church ... the study found that for Jews living at the time of Jesus, ‘repentance’ meant ‘a fundamental change in thinking and living.’”

So Jesus did **not** say:

“Feel-remorse-about-your-sins for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

It was more like:

“Fundamentally-change-your-thinking-and-behaving for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

And what about the first recorded sermon? In it, Peter said,

Fundamentally-change-your-thinking and be baptised ... for the forgiveness of your sins.

Peter did **not** say,

Feel-remorse-about-your-sins and be baptised ... for the forgiveness of your sins.

But don't misunderstand: it's **not** saying "if you change your thinking and behaviour then when you die you will get into heaven" because (1) he's talking about heaven **now** and (2) as we know, it's not by good works that we come into a relationship with God (it's the relationship with God that leads to good works).

Do you remember back in "the early days", when I started writing all this stuff? How I said that if people are to come to faith, they **first** have to understand about sin-and-a-holy-God?

Well, I was wrong; we don't have to **start** with that! And neither did Peter in that sermon I mentioned. He **started** with the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

So how we 'preach the good news' won't be the same in every situation throughout history, because we have to start where people really are, and not say, "If you want to know about Jesus' good news, you first have to understand..." No, no, no!

Start with **where they are** and work out what aspects of 'the kingdom of God' they can relate to. Share that with them as GOOD NEWS!

No, I'm not going soft on sin; I'm not a universalist; I WANT PEOPLE TO BE SAVED! But for 99% of the people around me, sin-and-a-holy-God is a terrible starting point. How small is our God?! Is there only one mechanism through which he can bring people to salvation, to shalom, to wholeness, into a living relationship with himself?!

How far wrong can we go if we tell people about the person and work of Jesus Christ?! Let God be God and he will work in people's lives in the way he chooses.

Finally, to see just how positive a concept repentance is, here are a few quick quotes:

– "The kingdom of God is near. *Repent and believe* the good news!"

– And then "Produce *fruit* in keeping with *repentance*."

– "The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and *repentance and forgiveness* of sins will be preached in his name"

– "*Repent and be baptised*, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the *forgiveness* of your sins. And you will receive the *gift* of the Holy Spirit."

– "*Repent*, then, and turn to God, so that your *sins may be wiped out*"

– "God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give *repentance and forgiveness* of sins to Israel."

– "God has granted even the Gentiles *repentance* unto *life*."

– "...the riches of his *kindness, tolerance and patience*, not realising that God's kindness leads you towards *repentance*"

– "God will grant them *repentance* leading them to a *knowledge* of the *truth*"

– "He is *patient* with you, not *wanting* anyone to perish, but *everyone* to come to *repentance*."

28 New Testament documents

“The Bible has been changed over the years”

You’ve probably heard people say this, but is it true? Let’s examine the evidence.

The Bible as a whole is important, but I think it’s particularly important to know how reliable the **New Testament** documents are, because the whole of the Christian faith hinges on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. So let’s use modern knowledge, science, scholarship and cold clear logic to examine the evidence.

First, we need to avoid a possible misunderstanding: In an old Bible (the King James Bible, written in the 17th century), if you read Matthew chapter 6, verse 6, it will say, “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet.” But if you look in a modern Bible, it will probably say “But when you pray, go into your room.” So we might say that, even in the past 400 years, “the words of the Bible have been changed”.

But Jesus didn’t say *either* of those two things above. It was recorded for us as, “σὺ δὲ, ὅταν προσεύχῃ, εἴσελθε εἰς τὸ ταμιεῖόν”. So what we are reading in our Bibles is a **translation** from the original Greek into English.

So yes, the translations have changed, but that’s because the English language has changed. However, each new translation goes back to the same original Greek version. So it’s the Greek New Testament that we need to think about.

Has the Greek text been changed over the years?

First of all, don’t forget that the New Testament isn’t just a single book; it’s a series of books, written by different people at different times within a period (so the scholars tell us) of about 60 years after the events they describe. The earliest of these were written as letters, so let’s concentrate on one of those (any one will do, just to illustrate the principle).

So Paul sat down and wrote a letter to his friend, Timothy. Let’s refer to this original letter as document A. Timothy thought that it was really helpful, so he read it out to his congregation(s) in Ephesus. Then someone created a written copy of that letter; we’ll call this document B. Indeed, there were probably a number of such copies, but let’s call them all B documents, because they are direct copies from the original.

Then as some of the Christians moved from place to place, other people made copies of these copies – let’s call these C documents, because they are copies of copies of A.

As time went by, there would even be copies of copies of copies, so let’s call these D documents, and all these manuscripts would have been spread over hundreds of miles from Ephesus.

They would have done the copying very carefully because, to the believers, this was a very, very important document. But no copyist is infallible, so some words will probably have been changed.

Now, just suppose for a minute that the church decided that it didn’t like what Paul had written, and they wanted to change it. How would they do that? Well, they would start by writing out a ‘corrected’ version of Paul’s letter – we’ll call this document K. And then they would send people out with copies of K.

If a church leader brings a copy of K to your church, and you’ve got a B, C or D copy, they will tell you that your copy is wrong, and please would you correct it?!

That’s fine, but what about all the other Bs, Cs and Ds? If the church hierarchy wanted K to be the ‘correct’ version, then it would have to get all of the Bs, Cs and Ds changed, all over the known world!.

I really can’t see that it would be feasible to orchestrate a change in the contents of all those early documents, and it would get more and more difficult over time, as the number of copies increased and spread further afield.

But what about all those copying errors?

Fast forward to 2019. In front of us we have the words of the Greek version of Paul's first letter to Timothy. How do those words compare with that single original document A, that Paul wrote? The A parchment is long gone, of course, and probably most of the B, C and D documents... ..but not all of them! Some of those early manuscripts **are** still available in museums and libraries, and so we can actually examine them.

We could look at all those manuscripts and compare them, verse by verse, word by word to see what the majority of copies said. Indeed, scholars have been doing this for years – a discipline known as textual criticism. The agreed result is that the majority of the verses are identical, so we can be sure that they are indeed what Paul wrote in document A.

But, yes, there are **some** verses that are different in these manuscripts – don't let anyone tell you otherwise. There are even some New Testament books that have extra verses that occur in some manuscripts but not in others.

If you look at your English Bibles, those differences in individual verses, and the extra verses that were added (or subtracted) are clearly marked, so we know not to base too many points of doctrine on those debatable verses. For example, there's a note on Matthew 4:44 saying that some 'late manuscripts' add 'for yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory. Amen.'

How many manuscripts are there?

How many old manuscripts have we got, and how close are they, time-wise, to the date when the originals were written?

Pinching some material from the Alpha Course workbook... Scholars think that the various New Testament books were written at dates between AD 40 and AD 100. We have manuscript copies of some parts of those books dated (partly by radiocarbon analysis) to around AD 130, and full manuscripts from AD 350 (note that the NT is ~170,000 words). So those manuscripts are from within a time lapse of at best 30 years and at worst 310 years from when the books were written.

And there are over **five thousand** (part or whole) Greek manuscripts!

How does that compare with other documents that historians accept as valid evidence for their historical researches?

| | Written | Earliest mss | Time gap (yr) | Copies |
|-----------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| <i>Livy's Roman History</i> | 59 BC – AD 17 | AD 900 | 900 | 20 |
| Tacitus | AD 100 | AD 1100 | 1000 | 20 |
| Herodotus | 488–428 BC | AD 900 | 1300 | 8 |
| <i>Caesar's Gallic Wars</i> | 58–50 BC | AD 900 | 950 | 10 |
| New Testament | AD 40–100 | AD 130 (full mss AD 350) | < 310 | > 5000 |

Fortunately, the New Testament manuscripts are something that have been very highly prized through the centuries, and so people have gone to great lengths to preserve them intact!

I'm no historian, but I'd say that Christians are fully justified in believing that the Greek New Testament documents we have today are close enough to what the writers actually wrote down to recommend them to other people as being worthy of very serious consideration.

29 Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done

Eight days ago, I wrote to the GP surgery to express my concern about Sue's health, and that she still hadn't been seen by a GP. That lunchtime she saw a GP, then came to the Alpha lunch at church: "Can you fetch the car? I'm to be admitted to hospital." Twenty-four hours later she had a CT scan and then came home. Another 48 hours later we saw the consultant, who told us that Sue has a massive ovarian cyst that needed removing. Currently (day eight) we're awaiting news of an operation date – the medical team meets tomorrow to decide dates.

What was the Alpha session that I missed last week while I was in the hospital? "Does God heal today?" (God has a sense of humour, right?!) So it's not a theoretical question but a very real and practical one. And it's one we touched on in our Alpha group again yesterday.

I shared where I was at, on my journey: No, God doesn't *send* suffering; rather, (1) we have freedom to choose, so we individually bring suffering on ourselves and on other people, (2) this world is subject to decay, and part of that decay is sickness and death – it's a natural process that will continue until Jesus returns to make all things new.

But I know that sometimes God does intervene in that natural process, and I'm struggling with that idea: that he breaks the rules (natural law). I know God does that because I and others around me – and you too, I'm sure – have experienced what we call 'miracles' (whatever that means, and we could discuss it, but not now!) The problem I have is to know when, where, why God should/ would work miracles. And the immediate outworking is how should I (we) be praying for Sue? I'm writing this because I think the Lord's prayer might help, but first back to general principles: if I've learned nothing else this past two years, it's that God wants **above all else** for us to grow in our loving relationship with him and with each other: the first and second commandment. To add to that: God is all-powerful, so God can/could do anything. But actually there's something God can't do – force us to love. In love, God has set aside that power and has given us freedom to choose. Very dangerous!

So why did Jesus tell us to pray: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done?

If something is 'God's will' then surely it's going to happen, and we can't stop it, right? God is all-powerful, right? Actually, no, I don't think that is right.

As Bishop Desmond Tutu said: "For whatever reason, since humankind showed up on the scene God does nothing without a human partner." So maybe – and here I'm just edging forward tentatively – maybe God only does miracles when we cooperate with him, when we pray and then we actually do something?

I've certainly been struggling for years with the question, "What's the point of praying?" So maybe I'm heading in the direction of some sort of answer: 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done'. But how do I apply that at crack of dawn on 16th Jan 2019 to the presenting problem that Sue's ill and needs healing; how do I pray? how do **we** pray? What are we asking/expecting God to do? We've already seen miracles of coincidence as the process of diagnosis has moved at incredible speed, against all the odds. But what next? Miraculously take the cyst away? God could do that!

Well, God **could** do that, of course, but what I'm trying to do is to discern God's 'thy will', and to get behind that. I'll tell you, as I told God between 3.30 and 4.30 this morning, what I'd like, please: It would be brilliant if, when I see the consultant after the operation, he said something like, "Interestingly, although the CT scan showed that the cyst was about 9kg, by the time we took it out, it only weighed 4kg!"

I want that for good reasons (I think! but human motivation is a slippery fish!): I want people to be encouraged by seeing something miraculous. But then what about the two folks at St Ed's who are facing operations for cancer, and the young Mum who often sits in front of us at church who has been debilitated by having over 100 migraines since August? And there are others struggling with ill health.

What's the **important** thing here?! The important thing is relationships, not physical healing. How is Sue's illness and my/our reaction to it and/or any miraculous healing going to enrich my/our relationships?

Can I take you back into my Alpha group discussion yesterday. We've talked a lot about our journeying together over the past 2/3 months and I asked them how their journeys were going. One lady with an atheistic husband said,

“I think I’m becoming more patient.” Now that is **brilliant**; I’m really excited about that! God is clearly at work in that lady, and in the relationship with her husband. I can pray with confidence (‘thy will be done’), that her husband will recognise her increased love and patience, and that he will realise that the god he **doesn’t** believe in is different from the God his wife believes in. (Actually, the god he doesn’t believe in may well be the same wrathful god that I no longer believe in!)

Please continue to pray for me and for Sue – and for yourselves and the people around you. Here’s one thing you can pray that I absolutely **know** is ‘thy will’: In any and every situation that you, I or we, face, please may we grow in love, joy, peace, **patience**, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? What a **massive** impact that would have if that fruit grew in us! And I know it’s also God’s will that we grow in the use and exercise of his spiritual gifts (and of our natural gifts too, of course, like writing macros!) so that God’s kingdom can grow, i.e. our relationship can grow, here and around the world.

The prospect of seeing how God will answer our prayers is exciting, very exciting, so do let’s continue to “encourage one another” and continue to pray God’s kingdom and his will into all the situations around us.

Paul Bev. 16.1.19

30 A view from outside

How do outsiders view us?

In all my writings, I’ve tried to be positive, indeed I’m feeling more positive than ever in my Christian life. But one thing I’ve been wrestling with lately is why are there so many husbands who rarely or never attend church? Is that true of your church? I can name more than a dozen men, some of whom just say they’re too busy, while others are quite strongly anti.

I’ve been thinking about what might be putting them off, and I wonder if it’s the following view of the Christian faith. If any of them have been on an “Introduction to Christianity” course, here’s what they would probably have been told:

First the bad news: We all sin, we all break God’s rules, and this makes God angry. That’s because God is “too holy to look upon sin”. We’ve broken God’s rules, so we deserve to be punished. But here’s the good news: In his love for us, God has made a way so we don’t need to be punished. Jesus came and took our sin on himself and died for us. Some courses illustrate this with a true story where, in a prisoner-of-war camp, someone without any family volunteers to die instead of a man who has a wife and kids back home. God takes the punishment we deserve.

So now we can be justified, “just as if I’d” never sinned. Problem solved! We’ve been given a free pardon and therefore we can be allowed into heaven. We can have a relationship with him now – we just need to repent of our sin and turn to God: pray a prayer to admit our sin, accept his forgiveness (and some add: receive the Holy Spirit) and we’re now saved; we’re a Christian.

That might be how they see it, but we know there’s more to it, much more! Becoming a Christian is just the beginning of an exciting life as a disciple of Jesus. We soon discover that (bad news) we go on sinning, but good news: “If we confess our sins, God is faithful to forgive our sins.” And he graciously forgives us each time we mess up (again!).

But to grow, we need discipleship: we do need to exercise discipline. All new Christians must be taught to read their Bibles regularly; they must pray regularly; they must go to church; and they must evangelise their friends and

family. And we can encourage one another in this: we can get together in small groups, where we pray for one another and hold each other accountable. “Are you reading your Bible? Are you praying? Have you shared the gospel with anyone this week?”

And we also need to hold one another accountable for **sin**, because we all know how easy it is to justify our actions, because they make us feel good. So we need to be willing to tell one another when **they** are straying. Obviously, we need to be very careful about this. We need to read our Bibles carefully so that we can tell the person exactly where they are going wrong and justify it by showing them what the Bible teaches.

And as Christians, we also need to be ‘salt and light’, as Jesus taught, so that we can stop the rot and, let’s face it, there’s more evil out there than ever before, because Christian principles have been rejected! But once again, we need to be **very** careful; we need to study our Bible diligently, so that we can justify exactly what **is** wrong and why. Then we can tell society where it is going wrong and help to put it right.

Great! And what does all this give us?

Sadly, it all too easily gives us a Christian faith that is based on fear, and guilt and shame. Or am I being unrealistic?

Do we read the Bible because we feel we ought to or because we’re fascinated by it and excited by the way it speaks into our lives? Do we pray because we feel we ought to or because we simply enjoy spending time with God and want to share our concerns with him. Do we tell other people about our faith because the vicar told us to, or because we just can’t stop talking about the person we love so dearly?

On another topic, it has struck me recently what an absolute scandal it is that churches split and split and split because each thinks it has the ‘right answers’ (i.e. what ‘the Bible clearly teaches’). What a waste of time and energy, distracting us from sharing the good news. And it gives outsiders the chance to say, “You can’t even agree amongst yourselves, so why should we take seriously what you’re saying about ‘being saved’?”.

But on my exciting journey this past two years I feel that I’ve joined in a stream that Sue discovered 10 years ago on the Cambridge spiritual directors’ course. We’ve benefitted hugely from people from a very wide range of traditions, Orthodox, Catholic and various flavours of Protestantism. It started for me when God knocked away the props of “what I’ve always been taught”, and left me floundering in ‘Does God exist even?!’

It’s been scary at times, but what joy it has brought me, and how it has deepened my relationship God and with Sue.

Thank you, Father!

Paul Bev. 19.1.19

31 What is the gospel?

As you might have noticed, I’m a word-based person so if I get a new idea, I often try to search the Bible for related words. I know that my favourite words of late, ‘Trinity’ and ‘relationship’, occur never and once, respectively, in the NIV New Testament, but my latest word, ‘gospel’ or ‘good news’, occurs 123 times.

So today’s question is what do we mean by the ‘gospel/good news’? Or, more importantly, what does the Bible mean by the ‘gospel’? How is it defined? I want Scripture to talk more than me:

Jesus told us to preach it:

Mark 16:15 [Jesus] said to them, “Go into all the world and **preach the good news to all creation.**”

Paul couldn't help but preach it:

1 Cor 9:16 Yet when I preach the gospel, I have no reason to boast, because I am obligated to preach. **Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!**

Paul knew it was powerful:

Rom 1:16 For I am not ashamed of **the gospel**, because it **is the power of God** that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.”

But Paul warned of the dire danger of getting it wrong:

Gal 1:8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should **preach a gospel contrary** to the one we preached to you, let him be under a **divine curse!**

Ouch!

OK, so Paul tells us that it's critically important to know: **What is the gospel?**

I guess we could agree that a definition of the gospel ought to include God being perfect and holy, us being sinful, God being loving and sending Jesus as a ransom; then if we repent and believe, we can come back to God and be saved and empowered by the Holy Spirit. OK?

We might differ on the detail, but I think we could all agree that something like that is the core. That is what we've all been taught, isn't it?! But there's a growing movement suggesting we've got it wrong [I can see your hackles rising from here!], and this is motivated by the fact that we're failing abysmally to grow disciples. What proportion of people who make a decision for Christ as children are still active Christians by the age of 30–35? One survey in the States suggested ~22%. Anecdotally that's true of 100% of my children, so I have a personal interest in this issue!

All of you who are reading this text have, like me, been Christians for years and years, and so you **know** what the gospel is, right? But are you willing to go back to the Bible, question what you have “always believed” and let the Holy Spirit change your mind?

If you are willing, then here's the first clue: Just under half the New Testament (46%) is made up of four books, each of which is called '**The Gospel according to...**'. Why did someone call each book 'the gospel'? Maybe it was because they thought that of it as actually being 'the gospel'?

What I outlined earlier as 'the gospel' might better be termed 'the way of (personal) salvation', and I'm suggesting that 'the gospel' that Jesus, Peter and Paul preached is simply the narrative of how Jesus was the fulfilment of the purposes of God revealed in the Old Testament.

Don't worry, I'm not arguing that 'the way of salvation' is in any way untrue or unbiblical. I'm simply saying that if Paul says we'll be accursed if we preach 'another gospel' then let's be very sure we know what the Bible presents as 'the gospel'.

A friend pointed me to two YouTube video talks. They are very theological, but because of the thinking and questioning I've been doing of late, I did at least understand some of what the speaker said, and I was very excited by how much of it reflected my recent thinking.

I'll give you the links at the end, but in the meantime I'll shut up and let Scripture speak. I did a word search on 'the gospel' and 'the good news', and I'll just replay the verses I found – you can draw your own conclusions. Many of the quotes are similar, so you can skim over them.

I'll list the scriptures as they occur, but first I'll quote the only passage I know of where anyone (Paul) actually defines the gospel:

1 Cor 15 1. Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. 2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. 3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

The other exercise you could do would be to look at the places where Peter and Paul actually ‘preach the gospel’. And you can ask yourself how much of what I used to think of as ‘the gospel’ (i.e. the plan of salvation) is (or is NOT) included in what P+P cover in their preaching. Check out the seven sermons in Acts 2, 3, 10, 11, 13, 14 and 17.

So is it biblical to equate ‘preach the gospel’ with ‘preach the plan of salvation’? I don’t think it is, neither does the speaker:

My friend said:

I came across Scott McKnight on ‘**What is the Gospel?**’ when doing some cross referencing on **discipleship**. You will find him helpful, though long – but stick with it. He defines the Gospel after 41 min of the second talk.

This short version (18 mins) is a taster:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pFH4fUCxZ4> [Sadly no longer available]

This is a fuller version (1h 18m):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ECMQ0Fn6Q0k>

And I would add that unless you’re very theological, do watch the short one first. Of the long one, the first 40–50 minutes contain the most helpful material. And it will help to know that ‘soteriology’ is the study of salvation.

I hope and pray that this will challenge you and help you grow in your relationship with the Lord and enable you in your ministry of growing disciples.

Paul Bev. 28.1.19

Matthew 4:23. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

Mt 9:35. Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

Mt 11:5 The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

Mark 1:1. The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Mk 1:14. After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 15 “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Mk 8:35 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Mk 10:29 “I tell you the truth,” Jesus replied, “no-one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel 30 will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.

Mk13:9 “You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. 10 And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.

Mk 14:9 I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”

Mark 16:15 He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. 16 Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Lk 3:18 And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

Lk 4:43 But he said, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.”

Lk 7:22 So he replied to the messengers, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

Luke 8:1. After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him,

Lk 9:6 So they set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere.

Lk 16:16 “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.

Luke 20:1. One day as he was teaching the people in the temple courts and preaching the gospel...

Acts 2:14. Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. 15 These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! 16 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 17 “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. 18 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. 19 I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth

below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. 20 The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. 21 And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

22 "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. 23 This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 24 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. 25 David said about him: "'I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. 26 Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, 27 because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. 28 You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.'" 29 "Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. 30 But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. 31 Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. 32 God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. 33 Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. 34 For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, "'The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand 35 until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" ' 36 "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

37. When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" 38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call."

Acts 5:41 The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. 42 Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

Acts 8:12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women. ... 25 When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages. ... 35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. ...40 Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and travelled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Acts 10:34. Then Peter began to speak: "I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism 35 but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. 36 You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. 37 You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached- 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. 39 "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, 40 but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. 41 He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

44. While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. 46 For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, 47 "Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." 48 So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

Acts 11:20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. 21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

Acts 13:26 “Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. 27 The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognise Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath.

28 Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. 29 When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. 30 But God raised him from the dead, 31 and for many days he was seen by those who had travelled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people. 32 “We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers 33 he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: “‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.’ 34 The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words: “‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.’ 35 So it is stated elsewhere: “‘You will not let your Holy One see decay.’ 36 “For when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. 37 But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. 38 “Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. 39 Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. 40 Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: 41 “‘Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.’”

Acts 14:6 But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, 7 where they continued to preach the good news.

...

21 They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, 22 strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said.

Acts 15:7 After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. 8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. 9 He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? 11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

Acts 16:10 After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Acts 17:18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

...

22. Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

24 “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. 27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 28 ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

29 “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man’s design and skill. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”

Acts 20:24 However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.

Romans 1:1. Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God- 2 the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures 3 regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, 4 and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God, by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. ... 9 God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you 10 in my prayers at all times; ... 15 That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome.

16. I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. 17 For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

Romans 10:16 But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?"

1 Cor 1:17. Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. 18 I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done- 19 by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. 20 It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation.

1 Cor 9:16 Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!

1 Cor 15:1. Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. 2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. 3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

2 Cor 4:4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Gal 1:6. I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel- 7 which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!
... 10. Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ. 11 I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. 12 I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

Gal 3:8 The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." 9 So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

2 Tim 1:9 This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, 10 but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. 11 And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher.

Heb 4:2 For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith [because they did not share in the faith of those who obeyed]. ... 6 It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience.

32 Does God heal today? – Faith and fear

(No answers, just more questions)

As you must realise, any discussion on miraculous healing is not, at the current moment, just an interesting academic theological question!

I sat at Sue's bedside 3 or 4 hours after she had come out of theatre and, as she drifted in and out of sleep, she looked pretty terrible. Apart from all the tubes going in (and out!), her face had no colour and looked like a wrinkled prune – sorry, Sue, but it did! To be fair, you might expect her to look like that after she has lost one and a half stone in weight and has a 12" incision in her stomach.

Have you ever heard of 'drainpiping' – of the spiritual variety, I mean? I'd forgotten about it until then. Our great friend Captain Tony used to get the kids to do it at holiday club, and they did it at Spring Harvest too, I think. They explained that the healing power comes from God, so we reach out one hand to the person needing healing (or whatever other need) and hold the other up towards heaven – we are just the channels for God's power, flowing through us. And God did use the kids' simple faith to bring about real change in people's lives!

It felt right, so I drainpiped Sue for some time, while she slept.

Wind back to 1985 and one of the wave of healing meetings where miraculous things seemed to be happening despite my very conservative, anti-charismatic feelings. They invited people to go and be prayed for. "Do I have to go forward?" asked Sue, because she wanted to get rid of the asthma she'd had for 10 years, since our Kenya days. "No, I can pray for you," I said. Somehow, for some reason, I prayed, "Thank you Lord for taking Sue's asthma away!" How and why did I pray that? No idea, but when we went outside afterwards, into the cold night air, she said, "I can breathe!" The asthma had gone and hasn't come back since. How? Why? Dunno! I guess I was given, for that occasion, the gift of faith – and the Bible says, clearly, that faith is a gift from God.

Then almost two years ago, shortly after we had joined St Ed's, they had a healing service. I knew my relationship with Sue needed fixing, so I grabbed Sue's hand – she didn't object – and we were first at the communion rail. Someone came to pray for me, individually; "No, both of us together, please," I said. After we sat down we realised that everyone in the whole church was going up for prayer! Did that prayer for healing work, even though the person didn't really know us from Adam (and Eve)? Dunno, but I know that our relationship is the best it's been for a very long time, probably ever in our 45 years.

Did the drain-piping work? Well, 15 hours later, Sue looked totally different, sitting up and smiling (though laughing wasn't a good idea!). Was it prayer? Was it the drugs? Was it the excellent care she received? I don't know, but does it matter? Then again, maybe it was you guys praying? I don't know, and I don't care; I'm just very grateful to God, and to you. It's been a humbling experience.

What of the future? I said we'd been given the all-clear as regards cancer, but Sue reminded me that that's not strictly true. The rapid test of the cyst, done during the operation, was negative, so they didn't remove lymph glands etc., but they're running a more critical test that takes two weeks, and we'll see the consultant on 12th February to get the results.

So now the theoretical discussions about prayer and healing become very real and practical again. How do we view the prospect of receiving those results? My mother was petrified of cancer and wouldn't even use the word. I knew that one of my father's sisters had "died" before I was born, but it was never spoken about. I think I have inherited at least some of that fear. I look at the brown spots on my body (another thing I inherited from Mum!) and the patch on the end of my nose, and I wonder about skin cancer. Indeed, as I was showering this morning I noticed a strange red spot, 3mm across, on my calf, unlike anything I've seen before. Should I get it checked, if it persists?

What do **you** think about faith and fear and healing? Recently, I've had some lively debates about this, with a good friend. Is fear a bad thing? Fear of snakes and wild animals kept our ancestors alive. I feared for Sue's wellbeing as her stomach grew, and so I urged her to insist on a doctor actually seeing her. But fear can also paralyse us – and maybe even make us ill, do you think? I'm more than happy to accept that our attitudes and our relationships, especially the negative ones, can have a huge effect on our health.

One more thing in this rambling early-morning missive, and it's part of the faith/fear thing: The good friend above, plus my spiritual director friend, independently said a couple of weeks ago, as we faced the scary unknown, that we should find scriptures that we could read out loud and declare God's promises. Yes, OK, but **which** scriptures?! The only one that jumped out at me was the Sunday morning reading (we use the CofE lectionary): Isaiah 43:1 to wherever. It's the bit about God being with you as you walk through the rivers and through the fire. It sort of seemed good because it was about how God loves us and cares for us, but I was uneasy about the fire and rivers (we didn't at that stage know what the problem was). The fear of cancer was part of it, I'm sure.

OK, it had the bit about bringing your children back from the east, west, north and south – and our two sons are north and south of Taverham (well, NNW and SSE) – but I still had this nagging fear that God was preparing us to face something nasty. But go a bit further into Isaiah 43 and you get that lovely “Forget the former things ... see I am doing a new thing” and what an amazing ‘new thing’ we've experienced! And I've tried to walk through it with you folks, but how do I know what God **is** saying to me?

I wasn't sure whether to share this final bit, but I think it would be more honest to do so. As you'll have gathered, sleep hasn't been coming easily of late, partly for good reasons – excited about what God has been doing – but partly for bad reasons: fear of what the future might hold.

I tend to notice patterns in numbers and letters – it's one of the hazards of being a proofreader, I think. I'm cycling along, glance at my speedo and see a speed of 12.3 mph or a distance of 22.2 miles – it's a strongly reinforced synapse in my brain, I suppose. But of late, when I wake up early, the time seems to be 4:44 or 3:21. Coincidence? Maybe. That old synapse? Maybe. But one thought I had was to wonder if God was saying, “Don't worry, it's me. I'm here for you. I'm trying to reassure you.”

That's nice, but I didn't really **want** to believe this was God's doing. Why? Well, as with Isaiah 43, faith says, “God is with you,” but fear says, “Why do I need to know that? Presumably it's because difficult times are coming.” I don't want any difficult times to come, thanks!

Having got to sleep at about 9.30 last night (I'm pretty tired!), at 12.34(!) I awoke to go to the loo. I struggled a bit (as I often do) to get back to sleep. The next time I woke and looked at the clock it was 2:34. “OK,” I thought, if it's you, Lord, how about three in a row?”

After waking at 2:34, I tried to get back to sleep, but these thoughts that you're now reading kept niggling, and I realised that I might as well get up and write. I cautiously sneaked a look over my pillow to see the clock. It was 3:10. I laughed at myself (with myself) for having thought that God was trying to speak to me through numbers. I lay there for a while, and then got up and had a shower. When I came back into the bedroom and looked at the clock, it was 3:33 – a row of three threes!

OK, OK, I know you love me, Lord, and I know I can face the future with you. Yes, at some stage, be it sooner or later, difficult times will come. Please help me to trust (faith) you for all I need, we need, as I face my (real) fears.

Paul Bev. 1.2.19

33 Your final answer

“Your final answer?!”

“Yes, that's my final answer!”

“Paul, you have won a million pounds!!!”

Frankly, that's how I felt early this morning after what God seemed to be showing me (yes, I've just had yet another of those lying-in-bed-early-morning sessions).

I was thinking about two of my readers (who have been among my most avid), Anthea and Beatrice, married to Cedric and Desmond, respectively. A and B are keen Christians, both very involved in their respective churches,

while C and D are very sure that they **don't** believe. Don't get me wrong, C and D are really lovely, caring husbands, supportive of their wives, but I'm willing to bet that, if they were honest, they would rather their wives weren't quite so involved in church activities.

In an email, Anthea told me that the first time she went to Spring Harvest, the theme was 'Hell', and she cried herself to sleep every night, thinking of her beloved Cedric.

Sorry, but I cannot and will not believe that the Jesus-God who walked this earth 2000 years ago and who said, "*I have come that they might have life and have it to the full*" wants Anthea to live in dread fear like that.

WHAT HAS GONE WRONG?!

Let me rewind to a conversation in a Costa Coffee nearly two years ago. I was excited by Richard Rohr's *The Divine Dance*, in which he presents a view of the gospel as a glorious relationship with God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, into which he longs to draw us. Rohr was saying exactly what I thought my faith ought to be like, and I was thrilled, but I suspected that it might not fit with the views of some Christians.

I therefore asked a theologically trained friend from my former church, a chap whom I love, and whose views I respected. I had been particularly encouraged by Rohr's view because, as I told my friend, this was a way of seeing God that my Tim might possibly relate to. Having read the book, this friend told me very graciously, but very firmly, that Richard Rohr "has rejected 30% of the Bible", and he suggested that maybe I was allowing my love for Tim to compromise my beliefs, in order to find an 'easier' version of the gospel.

So, after two years of theological struggle (the last six months of which I have shared through these writings) where am I at? If anything, I have moved even further away from my friend's view of the gospel. However, I believe that what I have found, portrayed within the pages of the New Testament, is "a more beautiful gospel", a more precious pearl than I could ever have imagined, buried in a field. Why did it take me until the age of 70 to find it?! Well, I'm now going to sell all I possess and buy that field, rejoice in what I have found, and share it with anyone who comes across my path.

I have tried all the way through my writings to be positive and affirming of other people's views, but I now believe that what I have been taught as 'the gospel', what I have believed and what I have taught to my own children, and what I have argued some non-Christians into believing, is not (as I suggested last time) the gospel as preached by Jesus, Paul, Peter and others.

Don't worry, I believe even more strongly than ever in the efficacy of the Cross of Christ, but I see the church as having concentrated on one single facet of a diamond (to change the jewel in my metaphor!), to the exclusion of all others, and a facet that, to many in the 21st century, is really not the most helpful way of seeing what God has done in Christ.

But stand back from that facet, be willing to faithfully question 'what I've always been taught' and see if you too don't discover a more glorious jewel than you could ever have imagined.

OK, so what do I believe has gone wrong?

Positively, as I suggested last time, the gospel as preached by Jesus (i.e. even **before** he died and was raised) and by the New Testament church, was simply the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus as the fulfilment of God's plan from all eternity, and foretold in the Old Testament.

You may feel that view that is a bit vague and wishy-washy, but consider the traditional creeds of the church. Do they define the gospel more specifically than that? No, they just say that Jesus died "for us and for our salvation". If that was enough of a definition for hundreds of years, why do we now feel the need for a more exact definition? (This need appeared, I believe, at the time of the Reformation.)

"The gospel" as taught by the church today is: God is holy, you have sinned, Jesus died to take away your sin, so you can be saved and go to heaven; but heaven starts here on earth, so you have to become a disciple, i.e. you have

to read your Bible, you have to pray, and you have to evangelise: you have to tell other people (especially your unbelieving husbands/sons/friends) that they are sinners and are going to hell if they don't believe "the truth".

Sorry, but that way of looking at salvation is just one aspect, one facet, of the far more glorious gospel that the New Testament (fulfilling the Old Testament) shows us.

OK, so how, and in what way, did Jesus' death 'save' us? We're talking about a mystery (unless you can explain how God works!) that's way beyond simplistic 'explanations', and so the New Testament uses a whole series of images, pictures, metaphors to help us appreciate the glory of what Christ has done. And those are the different facets I'm talking about as being so wonderful.

But what the church has done is taken just one single metaphor, penal substitution, and elevated it to being "the gospel", by which everyone must be saved. No! God is way bigger than our explanations. And everyone is different, and what helps one person may well hinder another. We need to let God show us what is the most helpful picture of what Jesus has done, to use for the people we're talking to – just as Paul did on Athens (Acts 17).

By concentrating, for 48 years, on that one single facet, as if it were "the gospel", I became a Pharisee – zealous, Bible-based, maybe – insisting on what was RIGHT, and therefore who was in and who was out. If people don't 'believe the (my) gospel' then they will go to hell.

So what advice would I give to Anthea and Beatrice?

You know for certain that God loves Cedric and Desmond, even more than you do, right?! God is even more desperate than you are to see them come to know his love, right?! OK, so if you have faith (trust) in God, do you need to be worried for Cedric and Desmond? Don't you think God has a plan? Yes, you have to cooperate in that plan; yes, you have to pray 'thy will be done on earth', because that is how – I have come to believe – God works: he chooses to work **through us** and doesn't just wave a magic wand, and zap people and situations to change them.

So, Anthea and Beatrice, enjoy your wonderful relationship with this glorious Jesus-God, and pray for yourself to be filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – and you could maybe pray for each other too, with real feeling. (You both live in Norwich, so I could introduce you to each other! :-)

I think you **know** what will happen when Cedric and Desmond see that fruit, don't you? They will desire that fruit; they will realise that you have found something (Someone!) wonderful, and they will, in time, be tempted to try it! But if you live in fear, they will sense that, too.

Trust me! Trust God! Enjoy this new-found relationship with God. My two sons are not daft; they both **know** that something has happened to me and to Sue. And I know that I can trust God for them and their wives and our lovely grandchildren. So hang on in there!

Thank you, Father God for your wonderful love for me and for those I love; thank you Jesus that you were prepared to go through hell for me; thank you Holy Spirit that you intercede for my loved one with groans too deep for words. Please help me to trust you, implicitly, and to work hard and pray hard; and I look forward to seeing the wonderful things that you are going to do in the days and weeks and months and years ahead.

Lord, let it be.

Paul Bev. 6.2.19

34 The gospel – a panoramic view

As I've said repeatedly, I'm not a theologian, but I've listened to what a few theologians have said in their books and done a wonderful course on the creeds by Alex Irving, here in Norwich. I have then tried to re-express the ideas I have picked up, to try to work them out in my own head. I've tried to do this in non-theological ways – though obviously I have to use some English words that were invented specifically to express certain theological concepts – and I hope that some of what I've written has been helpful to you.

I realise that the overall view I'm expressing is not uncontroversial, but as I have again said repeatedly, this view is one that, to me, makes sense of the mess that my own faith was in for many years, and it has brought me to a point where I don't feel the need to justify my beliefs; I can just enjoy trying to put them into practice.

In the following, my aim is simply to lay out my beliefs in a logical way, and I present them here in case they are helpful for others trying to make sense of their own faith. So, here goes...

The gospel (as preached by Jesus and the early church) is simply the story of Jesus as the fulfilment of the huge range of prophecies in the Old Testament: the incarnation (i.e. birth and life), death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

Salvation is God's plan and purpose – based entirely on his grace and mercy – to restore humankind to the pre-Fall immortality, that is, conquering sin and death.

Salvation metaphors are the pictures used within the Bible, expressed particularly in the words of Jesus, Paul, Peter etc, to help us to appreciate that salvation, to receive it by faith and to apply it to our lives.

Atonement theories are human-derived theories, based on our exegesis of the Scriptures, to help us to appreciate and apply those biblical metaphors.

The Big Mistake that the church has made, and that has muddied the waters and made it difficult for me to fully appreciate the wonder of God's salvation and to apply it effectively in my life (a process we might call discipleship) is to take one particular atonement theory (penal substitution), call it "the gospel" and preach it exclusively. Penal substitution is an atonement theory that can only be justified as 'true' by our exegesis of the Scriptures.

The church has turned the gospel down.

Rather, it is the **gospel** that is supposed to bring in God's **kingdom** which will then turn the **world** upside down!

The way forward? We can never, ever 'understand' salvation (any more than we can understand God). However, I believe that we can do the following:

- 1) Affirm, as many of us do, week by week, that salvation is won by Jesus, who died "for us and for our salvation".
- 2) Study the Scriptures, revelling in the various biblical metaphors – what I've pictured as wonderful facets of a beautiful diamond – and see how we can apply them to our lives, thereby discovering those "good works prepared beforehand for us to walk in".
- 3) Preach the gospel; that is, tell anyone who will listen, about the wonderful story of Jesus as the fulfilment of the story of the Old Testament.

Next time I'll look at a few of those metaphors, and I hope we can all revel together in those metaphors – and others – as we read our Bibles day by day – an exciting prospect!

Paul Bev. 6.2.19

P.S. I laughed like a drain this morning when I awoke and thought towards finishing the above and had a sudden realisation: If you wanted to preach the gospel to the children of our nation, what would you do? You would take the gospel (= the story of Jesus set in the context of the way the OT leads up to it) and you would tell those stories in an entertaining way in schools. But a growing number of people are going into schools to do just that. They are not proselytising, but they are most certainly preaching the gospel. God is awesome, isn't he?!

P.P.S. Those of you who worship in a staunch Anglican church, where you are “forced to use the use the lectionary” and are “locked into celebrating the seasons of the year”, please stop complaining! Rather see it as I now think God intended it to be – constant, week by week revelling in some of the glorious facets in the diamond. Remember what Paul said to Timothy: “All Scripture is inspiring by God and profitable...”

35 The gospel – a panoramic view - II

The gospel – a panoramic view (II)

Based on what I said last time, here’s my current view of the gospel (it’s just a view; I’m happy to receive comments and discussion):

The gospel (as preached by Jesus and the early church) is entirely contained in the story of Jesus as the fulfilment of the huge range of prophecies in the Old Testament, i.e. the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. *This gospel is what brings...*

Salvation is God’s eternal plan and purpose – based entirely on his grace and mercy – to restore humankind to its pre-Fall immortality, that is, conquering sin and death. *The scripture tells us about this salvation by using...*

Salvation metaphors are the pictures used within the Bible, expressed particularly in the words of Jesus, Paul, Peter etc, to help us to appreciate that salvation, to receive it by faith and to apply it to our lives.

On this I stand; I can do no other!

Atonement theories, by contrast, are human-derived theories, based on our exegesis of the Scriptures; they can help us to appreciate and apply the biblical metaphors, but they are not inspired, and so they must not be allowed to take precedence over inspired Scripture. (Penal substitution, in my view, is one such atonement theory; it is not the gospel.)

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So today I’m going to look at a few of those **salvation metaphors**, and I hope that we can all revel together in these pictures – and others – as we read our Bibles day by day – an exciting prospect!

(Here, I acknowledge my huge debt to Brad Jersak’s *A More Christ-Like God – A More Beautiful Gospel*.)

### **Lost-and-found**

To start us off, here’s one of Jesus’ favourite pictures of salvation: *Jesus said to [Zacchaeus], “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”* (Luke 19:9,10)

If Jesus says that Zacchaeus **has received** salvation, on that very day, then that’s good enough for me. But could Zacchaeus have received salvation, even before Jesus had died and risen? Yes, why not? We are saved by grace, through faith. God can bring us salvation wherever and however he wants – he knows our hearts. Who are we to specify the exact requirements for salvation? On that day, Zacchaeus was brought (back) into covenant with God, into relationship with God – that, to me, is salvation.

What is the reaction of the religious leaders to Jesus’ free gift of salvation? They complained that *“he welcomes sinners and eats (fellowships) with them”* (Luke 15:2) – too right he does! And in response to the Pharisees’ comments, Jesus gives us three more ‘lost-and-found’ metaphors: the lost coin, the lost sheep and (my favourite) the lost (prodigal) son. The last one is such a wonderful picture of the totally outrageous love of God. And in each case, what is the result? Rejoicing – **big time!**

### **Great physician**

On another occasion, when Jesus got a similar complaint from the Pharisees, he responded, *“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”* (Mk 2:17)

In this metaphor, sin isn't seen as guilt to be punished but a spiritual disease to be healed. Sin is the dis-ease in our relationship with God; and it can wreck our social health and our physical health. Salvation can therefore be seen as healing – but not automatic healing, because sin damages us in many ways, and God is not a slot machine, but God's **direction** for us in salvation is towards shalom, wholeness in the widest sense.

### **Healing serpent**

Talking to Nicodemus, Jesus states, *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”* (John 3:14,15) Later, Jesus says, *“But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”* and, to be sure we understand properly, John adds, *“He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.”* (John 12:32).

This is another healing metaphor, harking back to Numbers 21, where God brought physical healing to the Israelites: they just had to trust God and simply look at a bronze snake on a pole. So here, Jesus pictures sin as a fatal disease, and Paul later heightens the image by saying *“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.’”* (Gal 3:10)

To receive spiritual healing from spiritual death, we simply have to look in faith (trust) to the Cross of Jesus.

### **Atoning sacrifice**

Some people think that this image recalls the Old Testament sacrifices where a goat, offered by and for the people, is killed, and the blood sprinkled on the Mercy Seat. Another goat is offered to ‘take away the sins of the people’, where the priest lays his hand on the goat's head, confesses the people's sins, and sends it off into the wilderness. Both of these might fit with the idea that we have to placate God, but (a) Jesus is called the Lamb of God, never the goat of God and (b) God doesn't need placating anyway – his attitude to us is that of the prodigal Father, longing for our return.

The way Paul sees it is, *“God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith.”* (Rom 3:25) So it's not **we** (or a priest) who offer the atoning sacrifice, but God. Clearly, it's **we** who need the sacrifice; it's **we** who need to be reconciled to God, not God who needs to be reconciled to us. Indeed, God never left us, never separated himself from us. *“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”* (1 John 4:10)

### **The Lamb of God**

*“Christ our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed.”* (1 Cor 5:7) This is the picture of that final fellowship meal of the Israelites in captivity in Egypt: a family meal, yet shared in hospitality with others. The blood of the lamb was smeared on the doorposts, and this kept the destroying angel at bay, so God's wrath, which was directed at the defiant Egyptians and their gods, was averted. (Note that God didn't do this lightly; he sent Pharaoh nine plague-type warnings, and only when he refused all these did God bring the tenth and most terrible plague.)

But when death comes, who brings it? *“When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the door-frame and will pass over that doorway, and **he will not permit the destroyer** to enter your houses and strike you down.”* (Ex 12:23) So the blood of the lamb acts to protect God's people from the destroyer; likewise, Jesus' blood welcomes God's presence into our lives and protects us from the destroyer.

### **Redemption and jubilee**

This is another wonderfully rich biblical image of God's salvation. To us, ‘redeeming’ might mean that something or someone that has gone wrong, and we manage to make it good again; or we might think of claiming the money or goods promised on a voucher, but that's a thin reflection of the Bible's view.

In the OT, God says, *“Remember you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord **redeemed** you”* (Deut 15:15), and that is the constant back-story for the NT's teachings about salvation.

Then there's the wonderful story of redemption in the book of Ruth – do read it, if you don't know it; it's about freedom from bondage, alienation, estrangement; it's a glorious picture of relationship in adversity – so it's a picture of the forthcoming gospel!

Then there's the year of jubilee when all debts were forgiven and the land restored to its original owners (nice theory, but not really put into practice by the Israelites). Again, it's a picture of the outrageous grace of God.

Not quite sure if it's about salvation, but this reminds me of the book of Hosea, a picture of God outrageously forgiving and forgiving and forgiving, despite Israel's constant unfaithfulness.

And when Jesus announced the start of his ministry and mission, he quoted Isaiah 61, proclaiming “*the year of the Lord's favour*”, thereby identifying himself with the idea of jubilee, freedom, redemption, the restoration of all that was lost. Why and how did this freedom come? There was no condition: Jesus simply announced that salvation was here, **now!**

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*

**Today** *this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.*

(Luke 4:18ff)

Three additional common NT metaphors, all of which form part of redemption, are adoption, inheritance and reconciliation, and these are evident in the parable of the prodigal son.

This is such a huge and glorious area! I could spend ages unpacking it all.

So can ‘redemption’ be reduced to: Jesus pays the price to buy us back from death? (But in which case, who is paying what and to whom?) No, it's way richer and more wonderful than some sort of legal transaction.

### **Ransom**

Jesus once said, “*the Son of Man came ... to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Mark 10:45), and Paul writes that Jesus “*gave himself as a ransom for all people.*” (1 Tim 2:6) but it's not obvious to know quite what this means. We associate ransom with a terrorist holding someone in bondage, and that image is used in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, as Aslan gives himself over to the witch, and is slain, to release Edmund.

Yes, in some sense we were ‘bought’ “*You are not your own; you were bought at a price.*” (1 Cor 6:19,20), but we need to be careful how we apply this metaphor. Again, to whom was the ransom paid? Not to God because God isn't holding us in slavery. Not to Satan, because God owes Satan nothing. Not to the Law, either, because mercy trumps Law.

No, Jesus ransoms us from **death**, by dying for us (he didn't have to die – he willingly chose to die), paying with his life. But Christ owed death nothing either, so he conquered death altogether. What a glorious good news! (But just don't get too hung up about trying to ‘understand’ it!)

### **Where are you at?**

Where are you at in your spiritual life? Which of these metaphors speaks most powerfully into your situation? And for those people you know, who haven't yet realised what Jesus has done for them, which aspect of the gospel might speak most directly to them?

If we're wanting people to come into a relationship with God then we can introduce them to Jesus and allow God to speak into their situation, into their needs, into their worldly relationships so that, in course of time, they will gladly bow the knee to our wonderful Saviour.

## 36 What is the Bible

### *What is the Bible?*

I've asked some pretty fundamental questions over these past few months about myself and about my faith. So, as a 'Bible-believing Christian', what more fundamental a question could I ask than 'What is the Bible?'

But if we believe the Bible is in any sense 'God-breathed' (inspired), then we have to base our understanding of the Bible on the nature of the God who breathed it. So what is this God like who inspired the scriptures?

The church has always seen God as a communicating God, one who speaks. We see God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, eternally existing, three persons in one God, each in communication with the other – so it is God's eternal nature is to be in communication, in relationship, in love: God is love.

How then does this communicating God communicate with us?

*In the past God **spoke** to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has **spoken** to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.* (Hebrews 1:1,2)

*In the beginning was the **Word**, and the **Word** was with God, and the **Word** was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.* (John 1:1-3)

God is a communicator, indeed God **IS** communication: God is **the Word**.

So with that as our firm basis, let's ask again, what is the Bible? First off, is it **the word of God**?

I looked this up on Google (as you do!). The first hit (apart from a JW website) is from *biblestudytools.com*, a huge resource of Bible materials, and I can't find anything to suggest it was set up by some wacky, extreme sect, yet it says:

What does the Bible say about the **Word** of God? Since the Bible is often considered the "Word of God" there is much to find about this topic in scripture. **The Bible is referred to as the Word of God** meaning it can be considered a **direct line of communication** from the Lord, interpreted by the authors of the respective books.  
*(my emphasis)*

Really?! In my NIV New Testament, 'the **Word** of God' occurs only once, and that's in Revelation and refers to Jesus; and then there are 37 occurrences of 'the **word** of God'. I've looked through them all, and I can't find even one that can be read as 'the Bible'; they all seem to me to refer to 'communication about God' (by whatever means), or 'the communication **of** God'.

Does the Bible say **anything** about 'the Bible'? How about: *All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.* (2 Tim 3:16)

But what did Paul mean by 'all scripture'? Does he mean 'the Bible' (as we have it today)? No, he couldn't have meant that, because some of it hadn't yet been written! So unless you think it was a prophetic statement, then it must have been a more general statement: all holy writings are inspired by God and can be useful. (Which holy writings? And are they *totally* inspired or *partially* inspired? That's a whole other question, maybe for another time!)

But don't worry! I'm not in **any** sense rubbishing the Bible; indeed, the Bible is more important to me now than it has ever been – I've certainly never, ever studied it as intensively as I have recently. But I think that **over-claiming** things for the Bible actually brings it into **disrepute**, and stops outsiders taking it seriously.



I'm involved in what one of my authors calls 'faithful questioning': because I have come to know and love God so much more of late, and because I trust him more than ever, I am happy to go to God and ask, 'Abba, what **IS** the Bible?'

In one sense, the Bible is just words on a page, and those words were written by a huge range of different authors, in different languages, at different times in history. Were those authors perfect? No. Were their writings dictated word for word by God? No. Well, I don't believe they were.

Can we read what they actually wrote? No, we can't – well, I can't, because all I can read is my English NIV (or other translations). So, by what process, through what chain, does the information pass, on which I feed my soul as I have my quiet time this morning?

**Original authors** – write – **Greek/Hebrew texts** – copied – **theologians/translators** – translate – **English text** – Paul Bev. interprets – **feeds his soul**. As a purely mechanical process, is that correct? If so then that doesn't seem to me to be a very 'direct line of communication'.

Again, don't worry. I'm a man of faith, and I'm faithfully questioning, and God is, by nature, a communicating God. So let's look at this **chain** of communication again, and this time, let's add God's input by his Holy Spirit...

|                |                       |              |
|----------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| HS inspires... | <b>Authors</b>        | write...     |
| HS inspires... | <b>Gk/Heb texts</b>   | copied...    |
| HS inspires... | <b>Theol's/Trans.</b> | translate... |
| HS inspires... | <b>English text</b>   | interpret... |
| HS inspires... | <b>Paul's soul</b>    |              |

This picture might be a bit simplistic, but although I do not believe that the Bible infallible†, I have **complete** confidence in the **communicating God** who has used the efforts of fallible humans to provide us with such a wonderful document to point us to **the Word** of God.

As an enquiring Cambridge student who had recently come to faith and had discovered real love for the first time (coming from a dysfunctional family), I met an elderly gentleman (who was probably aged 50 or 60!) at a Christian conference centre. I said that I could see that the Christian message was good, but I realised that it could only be true if the Bible was true.

'Would a God who loves you that much give you an **unreliable** document on which to base your faith?!' And that response has stuck with me for 50 years.

So yes, I **can** have confidence in the Bible only because I can have complete confidence in the **Person** who inspired the process by which that Bible has touched my heart. Yes, I know that's a circular argument; I know it doesn't **prove** anything, but neither can you prove that someone loves you – you just **know**.

*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the **prophets** at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his **Son**, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. (Hebrews 1:1,2)*

**Next time:** How then do we **interpret** scripture, based on our relationship with God?

†The note-writer in my NIV Study Bible claims that the Holy Spirit's involvement is *'so powerful and pervasive that what is written is the infallible and authoritative word of God'*.

## **37 Are you preaching the gospel**

### ***Are you ashamed – for not preaching the gospel?***

*That is why I am so eager to **preach the gospel** also to you who are at Rome.*

*I am not **ashamed** of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in **the gospel** a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'* (Romans 1:15-17)

*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 angels.* (Mark 8:38)

As I woke early *yet again* this morning (at 4:56), I thought about the two articles I'd been writing and just needed to finish off: the second part of the controversial "What is the Bible?" and the summary article "Journey back to faith" which draws together the lessons I've learned since I started writing these articles.

I lay there thinking 'But is there any point in all this writing I'm doing?!' As I debated whether or not to get up, my mind drifted, and I thought of Romans 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel" ... **Of course!** "I am not ashamed of **the gospel**" But what did Paul mean by '**the gospel**'? I now believe that **the gospel** is simply the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and how it fulfils the Old Testament (see [34]).

In a flash I realised that if I'm right, then Martha no longer needs to feel ashamed! Indeed, Martha is **already preaching the gospel!** And I leapt out of bed.

Oh, sorry, let me explain. My great friend Martha (not her real name) appeared in an earlier article, where I explained:

Martha is a superb welcomer; she's a 'do anything for anyone' sort of person, but she's beating herself up because her church has told her that she has to 'share the Gospel' with x-number of her non-Christian friends, and she doesn't feel she could do that; indeed, she isn't sure she *wants* to do that.

Martha loves Jesus and loves her friends and family, but understandably she doesn't want to have to explain to them that, as nice persons as they might be, they are actually **sinners**, and face **God's wrath** unless they believe in Jesus! Sadly, Martha feels guilty for her silence.

But in that article, I then went on to say (to Martha and to all of us),

So does God actually WANT people to come to know his love? Of course he does!! Then you and I need to do some serious thinking about how we communicate that love in the 21st century.

And as you'll have seen, I've certainly been doing some serious thinking!

So I now want to tell Martha about my theory (article [34]) that 'the gospel' – as preached by Jesus, Paul and Peter – is simply the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. And I want to explain to her that the gospel is **not** 'The Four Spiritual Laws' or 'Two Ways to Live' or whatever other 'gospel' tract you've been taught to use in your 'evangelism'. No, **the gospel IS Jesus**: the person, what he said, what he did, the parables he told.

Martha doesn't need to be ashamed; she *already* preaches **the gospel**; she preaches it to the mums and toddlers each week – and she **loves** doing that! Of course she does! She loves Jesus and so she enjoys just talking to people about him and what he said and did. And to them, Martha IS the gospel; she radiates the gospel in her love and care for them. **Go Martha, go!**

Paul Bev. 16.2.19

(Interestingly, when I came to look up exactly what I said about Martha, I found her in Episode 1 'Rebuilding my faith', on 18th August – almost exactly six months ago. Has it really taken me six months and 50,000 words to realise this? I really have come 'full circle'.)

## 38 All the answers?

What has happened to Sue, I wouldn't wish on anyone, but so many good things have come out of it that I'm almost teetering on the edge of doing so. I could go on for ages about all the ways God has blessed us in it and through it – but then I do, don't I? I go on... and on... and on, as Sue graciously reminds me every now and then.

One particular joy that has come out of it is time with people, time with you. So many of you have been to visit us; thank you, it's been a real joy! Let's not stop doing it, please. (There's a verse about that, isn't there?! Let's not stop meeting together...)

But when we meet face to face, and we start talking about the Lord, and I start getting all excited, there is that ever-present danger of my 'going on'. Worse still is if any of you challenge me on some of the things I've been saying in my writings: I am apt to get a bit vehement and come over as if I've got all the answers. Sorry! And the very fact that I have written so much seems to suggest that I think I have all the answers.

Yes, I'm more excited than ever about my faith, and I think my faith is deeper than it has ever been, but I do still have a lot of doubt, and I definitely don't have all the answers, even though I may give that impression when I start 'going on'.

But I think if the Lord is saying anything to me (and hopefully through me) it's that faithful questioning is GOOD. I can see now that thinking I had all the answers, that I was **right** <full stop>, was probably the cause of my putting other people off from taking Jesus' claims seriously, maybe even my own family.

Probably that's when I argue most strongly against my fellow Christians; it's when they, it's when you, say to me that such and such is definitely the answer because and this scripture proves it. But if you catch me doing exactly that, I'm a hypocrite, sorry. And please point it out to me – you'll be doing us both a favour!

But yes, let's study the scriptures, let's faithfully question one another and the scriptures, let's faithfully question ourselves and our own faith; that way we'll grow in our faith and others will see in our hearts and lives and faces that we've met with someone wonderful!

I wouldn't wish on anyone my experience of being in a sect and then totally losing my faith, but as God has graciously drawn me out of it, through asking the difficult questions, and has shown me just how wonderful the gospel really is, just how wonderful Jesus really is, I'm almost teetering on the edge.

Paul Bev. 17.2.19

## 39 Love is not binary

At the end of article 36 'What is the Bible?', I promised a second part: 'How then do we interpret scripture, based on our relationship with God?' It is partly written, but (a) I realised that much of it is covered in article 5 'Interpreting Scripture' and (b) other ideas have surfaced more forcibly. Here's the latest interruption, though it's not totally unconnected...

At 4.30 this morning (again!), I got to thinking about Anthea, Beatrice, Cedric and Desmond (article 33 'Your final answer'), and this scripture popped into my mind. (But those of us with any unbelieving family members might want to prick up our ears – that includes me.)

*To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. **For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Cor 7:10-16)***

Interesting, eh?! What does Paul mean by 'the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife'? Is it a lifeline for Anthea and Beatrice to grasp, or is it just clutching at straws?

What have we been taught to believe? We're told that when we die – the instant we die – we will either be swept up to heaven or condemned to hell. But is that 'hell' just annihilation, or is it eternal torment? Christians interpret the scriptures differently on that one.

Sorry to touch a raw nerve, but in the interests of faithful questioning, it's good to face this: What will happen to Cedric and Desmond when they die (and your – and my – unbelieving family members)? Up or down? Yes or no? In or out? Heaven or hell?

But before I give you 'the answer' (Ha!), let's look at our passage again. Did you notice the 'not I, but the Lord' and the 'I, not the Lord'? What's that all about?! Is he saying, 'This I'm absolutely certain is right – it comes from the Lord, but this bit is something that I think is true, though I'm not 100% sure.'

That undecidedness doesn't sit well with us, does it? We like to KNOW. True or false? Right or wrong? How does it work? Yes or no?

If you asked Paul ‘Are these letters of yours inspired?’ I think he’d answer, ‘Well, I hope and pray so. I’ve prayed hard for these lovely people and I want God to bless them through what I’m writing here.’ But are your letters **infallible**, Paul? Can you imagine his response? I believe it would be: ‘Inspired, yes, infallible, no!’

But to digress from my digression, let tell you about my Tim. He’s been writing education papers for conferences, and is planning to do a PhD. I may be biased, but I think his ideas are ground-breaking. He can see the big picture, and is setting his educational ideas in the context of (the solution to) the mess that the world is in. How can schools produce people who are capable of making a real difference in sorting out the mess?

I’m particularly excited because, as I’ve proofread his papers, I’ve seen huge parallels between his thinking about education and mine about faith.

The first and most obvious is that he sees schools as learning communities. Every single member should be learning – pupils, parents and teachers – if they aren’t all learning, it’s not functioning properly (cf. my ‘faithful questioning’). And, of course, they must be communities, belonging, accepting, supporting and (dare I say) loving one another.

The next parallel comes in the theories of Charles Eisenstein’s ‘Sacred Economics’: Tim says, ‘...consider the way we frame our dominant global economic system, replete with concepts of *scarcity* and *accumulation*. If these conceptual foundations were transformed to [Eisenstein’s] notions of *abundance* and *gift* the implications for research and development of the system would be profound.’

Eisenstein is saying that we currently work on the basis of making sure that I accumulate enough for me, my family, my community, my country ... and sod the rest! That creates scarcity. But there are enough resources out there if our accumulation is only so that we can give it away – abundance and gift.

And the parallel? As I see it, we Christians tend to feel that we own the spiritual capital; we KNOW – indeed, by studying our Bibles we **define** – who has got it and who hasn’t. Maybe we need to sit loose and allow people (such as our husbands) to have their own spirituality on their own terms, and not hog it to ourselves. (Sorry, it’s a bit stumbling and vague, but maybe some of you will see where I’m going – hopefully not to hell in a handcart!)

And another parallel is in our understanding of the nature of the educational capital we are offering to the next generation. Tim and others are wanting to suggest that it is ‘post-Newtonian’. Now, I don’t know how good your physics is(!), but ‘Newtonian’ refers to looking at the physical world in terms of simple mechanics – forces, accelerations and mass, all related by simple equations – all very predictable.

But then, starting with Einstein (not to be confused with Eisenstein!) and his theories of relativity ( $E = mc^2$  and all that) and moving on into quantum theory, string theory and entanglement, etc., we reach a form of physics that defies understanding and explanation – but nevertheless ‘works’. If there were no quantum mechanics, for example, we wouldn’t have the ubiquitous LED.

The parallel that I see is that we like to have a nice controllable, simple, Newtonian faith. We want to be able to ‘explain’ our faith using ‘Four Spiritual Laws’ or whatever – a clear process by which we get (and can be sure we’ve got) salvation.

But we’re forgetting that not only is God post-Newtonian and totally **unexplainable**, but he created post-Newtonianism. And there’s probably also a post-post-Newtonianism still to follow!

Sorry, but I don’t see the Christian faith as a binary faith; it’s not a simple true/false, pass/fail, heaven/hell. Rather, it’s God, it’s Jesus, it’s the Holy Spirit, it’s a mystery, but above all, it’s love, so that means it’s about suffering with, in and for other people. And God – Father, Son and Spirit – are right there in the midst of that suffering; they are there for you and with you!

So to Anthea and Beatrice, and any like me with unbelieving family members I’d say (a) pray (and I am now just beginning to practice what I preach) and (b) love, but (c) don’t try to force them into a binary decision and (d) above all, don’t fear:

*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:18,19)*

Jesus didn't come to earth to bring punishment, but to bring love!

And finally, and most controversially, I'm suggesting we interpret scripture on the basis of Jesus, and on what he said and on what he was like. So, on that basis, what do we say about all the millions of people who are Hindus, Muslim etc.? What happens when they die?! Do they go straight to hell because they haven't 'accepted Jesus Christ as Lord'? Difficult question!

In quantum mechanics, there's a ridiculous idea called tunnelling. Inside an LED, a tiny electron comes along with, say, 1 volt of energy, and it comes up to a 'barrier' with a 'height' of, say, 5 volts, so it can't get through – no way! However, it does the impossible and 'tunnels' **through** the barrier – trust me, that's physically impossible. But the impossible happens and the electron emits that volt of energy as light, which means we get light from billions and billions of LEDs.

*'Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.'* When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, 'Who then can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, **'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'** (Matt 19:24-26)

*'I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. **I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen.** I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No-one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.'* (John 10:14-18)

*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not **wanting** anyone to perish, but **everyone to come to repentance.*** (2 Peter 3:9)

I wouldn't dream of telling God what he can and cannot do, but I know that his heart is to bless and not to destroy, to restore and not to bring retribution. Call me a universalist if you like, but I believe God will do everything in his power to save those who are willing.

Paul Bev. 19.2.19

## **40 Inoculating your children**

Here are a few ways in which you can inoculate your children, to make sure they don't 'catch' the Christian faith.

Sorry, I suppose I shouldn't joke about something so serious, but two years ago, I had little hope that any of my own family would follow my faith. Now, I feel totally different: I see the gospel in a different, more beautiful light; now I see God (=Jesus) in a different, more beautiful light. Sorry, men, but think of God as a mother who sees her children going off the rails. Feel her heart of longing! **That** is how God feels about my family. Yes, I have hope for them!

And of course it's not just our children; we can, and do, inoculate anybody and everybody.

I think that the most powerful inoculation tool is our CERTAINTY, saying (or implying): I know this is true. / Take it or leave it, but I'm right about this. / I have definite evidence. / I've seen it, therefore it's true. / It's true because the Bible says so.

Sorry, but I believe this is a total distortion of Jesus' teaching: Have faith. / Trust me. / Your faith has saved you, go in peace. / I am the truth. I am the way. / I'll give you life in all its fullness.

Jesus did **not** offer us certainty; rather he offered us a relationship of trust. And what a glorious freeing difference that is – we don't need certainty; we just need trust!

But as I look back I can see a lot of ways that I have inoculated people. It's basically, as I've said repeatedly, that I've spent 48 years as a card-carrying Pharisee: someone who is well-meaning, zealous for the faith, trying to help people to become Christians, by arguing (discussing) with them, convincing them that they are wrong and I am right. I have persuaded a few people, but how many have I inoculated?!

At my most stupid, when I was in that sect, I was discussing on an Acorn email group and the subject of homosexuality came up. So I thought it would help to convince people of the reality of the spirit world: I repeated what the leader had said, that he could look at someone and, by the dark colour of their aura (I still believe that he **could** see things about people by their auras) he could tell that they were gay. How crass; how stupid; what a massive inoculation shot I delivered that day. God forgive me!

I'm sure you'll be able to think of other inoculation techniques, but I'll suggest a few here. The way I'll play this is to suggest some really serious forms of inoculation, to get you nodding and saying, "Yes, it's terrible what **they** did", and then pop in a few that will be nearer to home.

My history isn't very good – a grade 9 at O level (7, 8 and 9 were different levels of failure, so I got the best!) – so please correct me if I'm wrong, but is it really possible that Christians could justify, from the Bible, treating black people as inferior, to be kept separate, for fear of corrupting white people? And didn't Arianism and the Nazi movement have some roots in the church?

What about the Victorians?! How much inoculation did they do?! Yes, there were Christians who did wonderful charitable work, but there was also a lot of hypocrisy. And Christians were guilty of terrible paternalism, almost male supremacy, despite the fact that Jesus shamelessly broke the social norms of his day in his positive attitude to women. And what about the use of corporal punishment, both adult and what was effectively child abuse – well, the Bible **does** say, repeatedly, "Spare the rod and spoil the child." (But see my forthcoming article 'What is the Bible II – Interpreting it like Jesus.')

Let's lighten the mood with a more gentle example of inoculation, where someone thought they were 'witnessing', but which I felt might not have been too sensitive. I chatted to a lady in the hospital restaurant, who turned out to be a Christian, and she told about her operation a few years earlier. It was for a brain tumour, and there was a very real chance that she wouldn't survive the operation. She did survive and is serving God with great gusto. Excellent, but she said that she told the surgeons afterwards, "While I very much respect your skill and care, I know that God was controlling your hands as you performed that operation."

Thinking of healing, I go back to the mid 1980s, when Sue was healed at a stroke from her asthma when I prayed for (unofficially!) at a healing meeting. Around that time, we were praying for a child with cancer, and someone said they believed that God had told them he was going to heal her. She died, and her parents haven't been to church since, as far as I'm aware.

Then a friend went to a family funeral recently, where the vicar thought it a good time to tell people that if they didn't believe in Jesus, they would go to hell.

OK, that's enough negative; we can all think of ways where we, or friends, for the best of reasons, have taken the opportunity to face people with the 'turn or burn' option, but as I've said repeatedly, I don't think that is the gospel; rather, it's one of the many ways (and possibly not the most helpful way) of picturing the process of salvation.

So, positively, I'm more than happy, where the opportunity arises (not where I artificially twist the conversation, as some people are trained to do) to mention Jesus, the things he said and did, what happened to him, how his disciples claimed that he had risen from the dead. That, I believe, is what Jesus and the New Testament generally mean by 'preach the gospel'.

But I think we'd do well to take careful note of: '*Always be prepared to give an **answer** to everyone **who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.***' (1 Peter 3:15)

Yes, pray and pray and pray for – and keep your eyes and ears open for – opportunities where you can **answer** people. That means **listen** to them! Listen to where they are at; show a genuine concern for them and **don't** just 'listen for an opportunity to witness to them'. If you're answering questions they aren't asking, you're probably just inoculating them, don't you think?

Paul Bev. 21.2.19

## 41 What is the Bible? (II) – Reprise

As I have said that I believe the Bible is 'God-breathed' (inspired), and therefore it is 'profitable for...' (various things, as Paul said to Timothy), that it is provided for us by the God-who-communicates and therefore we can trust God, by his Holy Spirit, to use it to speak to our souls.

This is foundational. God is a communicating God <full stop>.

How do I know this? That's because God – as the eternally existing Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is three persons in one God, and therefore is in **mutual communication**. It is therefore God's **eternal nature** to be in communication, in relationship, in love.

What is the primary way that God communicates with his creatures? Presumably it is through the Bible. We'd be in a mess without the Bible. That said, the early church didn't have the Bible, but I suppose it had eyewitnesses who could tell people all about it.

However, I gave it as my view that, because the Bible was written by fallible authors, it is not infallible, and if we pretend that it is, we actually **devalue** scripture, especially in the eyes of outsiders. Also, the English Bibles that we read are even further from being infallible – compared to the Greek and Hebrew originals – because they were **translated** by fallible humans.

But please don't panic! Have faith in God. We can trust the God-who-communicates because, in the chain of communication, God's Holy Spirit is intimately involved:

|                |                       |              |
|----------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| HS inspires... | <b>Authors</b>        | write...     |
| HS inspires... | <b>Gk/Heb texts</b>   | copied...    |
| HS inspires... | <b>Theol's/Trans.</b> | translate... |
| HS inspires... | <b>English text</b>   | interpret... |
| HS inspires... | <b>Paul's soul</b>    |              |

How then does this communicating God communicate with his creation?

*In the past God **spoke** to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has **spoken** to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.* (Hebrews 1:1,2)

The Bible clearly places Jesus as the **supreme communication** from God; that's why Jesus came to earth; that's why **God** came to earth – to communicate with us in the flesh, i.e. in a language we can clearly understand. (Is it any wonder, therefore, that more has been written about this one human being than any other in the whole of history?!)

So I gave it as my view that any other communication, by definition, is subordinate to Jesus, subordinate to what Jesus said and did. But that means that the Bible itself must be subordinate to what Jesus said. The Bible must submit to Jesus Christ as the supreme communication.

I know it sounds a bit tautological, because the Bible is the only means by which we know what Jesus did say, but I think that's just something we have to hold in tension, even though it feels as if we're pulling ourselves up by our own boot laces.



So if I'm right that the Bible is subordinate to what Jesus said. Does that mean that the Gospels, as carriers of Jesus' words, are the most important books in the Bible? Maybe, but the rest of the New Testament contains reports of 'things that Jesus said', so is that equivalent to the Gospels? (Sorry, but I'm still thinking this through as I write, because this idea only occurred to me.)

But I guess what it does mean is that the New Testament, as concerning 'what Jesus said when he was on earth' should take precedence over the Old Testament. Do you think? (I'm thinking on my feet here, so please correct me if I've missed something.)

Anyway, let's step back again and ask: why is Jesus the supreme communication from God? It's because Jesus is **The Word of God** through whom the universe was created:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (John 1:1-3)*

And what about the following scripture concerning 'the word of God'?

*For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring **word of God**. For, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, 25 but the **word of the Lord** stands for ever." And this is the **word** that was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:23-25)*

I believe that for Peter, as for Paul, Jesus Christ is **The Word of God** and also **the word of God**. That is, Jesus is the One through whom God spoke and creation happened, and Jesus is also **the word** that was preached by the early church (and should be preached by us). And what was the word that was preached by the early church? It was the gospel, the **good news** of Jesus as Lord.

So it looks to me as if what we've got is an equivalence between the following:

**The Word of God** – through whom all things were created  
= Jesus Christ

**The Word of God** – through whom God spoke in human flesh  
= Jesus Christ

**the word of God** – as preached by the early church, and which spread like wildfire  
= Jesus Christ

**the gospel** – the good news as preached by the early church  
= Jesus Christ

What a glorious vision of what the God-who-communicates has done for us! Hallelujah!

But what a travesty that, in our desperation to stop the Bible from being ignored and swept away, we have ended up calling it (as that mainline Christian website did) 'The Word of God'.

No, **no**, **NO**! There's only one Word of God. And even calling the Bible 'the word of God' (little 'w'), in my view threatens Jesus' supremacy. Why not let's just call it 'the Bible', and (next time, hopefully) I will look at interpreting the Bible: How can we give the Bible its rightful place, as supremely attesting to **The Word of God**, but subordinate to Him?

Paul Bev. 22.2.19

## ***42 Finally, a faith that I can be really proud of***

*(One definition of an optimist is someone who put his shoes back on when the preacher says, 'And finally ...')*

I've just checked on the spiritual timeline I keep, where I record significant events in my life, and it was in 1994 that I received a spiritual gift that I didn't ask for – tears for the lost: I would spontaneously start to wept as I thought about or talked about people not knowing the Lord. It came during the time when I was doing a lot of 'internet evangelism' – discussing the Christian faith via email.

At the beginning of the new millennium, a Bible study group I attended for a number of years, effectively became a small sect, and during that time, that gift atrophied because under the influence of the leader, I simply became scared about losing my own salvation.

Thankfully, seven years ago, I escaped that sect, but I then hit spiritual Ground Zero where I wondered if God even existed – maybe it was all made-up, wishful thinking. And from there I started trying to rebuild my faith.

Throughout my 50 years as a Christian, a recurring feeling has arisen (and then been lost again) that 'if we really believed this stuff, our lives would be totally different, and people would be attracted to the faith'. And this was related, always, to the idea of faith-as-relationship.

For five years after Ground Zero, my faith rebuilding programme continued, along traditional Evangelical lines, until two years ago I 'discovered' the Trinity – God-as-relationship. As my faith started to take off, God sowed the seed that it was time for us to change churches. It took just three days for Sue and me to decide to leave the church in which we had brought up our children and had worshipped for 37 years, and we joined the local Anglican church where we now live. Ironically, the church we left was called 'Holy Trinity'.

Once we had made that decision, the 'coincidental' events came thick and fast to reassure us that we had made the right decision. God put us in a church where it was OK to doubt, OK to question 'what I've always believed'. Thank you, Lord!

Over the past two years, I've faced my doubts, challenged my accepted Evangelical beliefs, read several really helpful books and, in the past six months, started writing about my beliefs as a way of processing my own ideas. This is 'article' number 42! Just at the time I started writing, a 'coincidental' meeting led me to attend a monthly course in Norwich about the creeds of the church – a major factor in God's building plans for my faith.

The past two traumatic months of Sue's illness (is it only two months ago that we first thought something might possibly be wrong?!) have given me time – hours each day – to think through all this. I'd like to say 'think and pray' but I'm not sure how honest that would be. Certainly, Sue's illness has meant that we've been carried on a huge wave of prayer that has been almost tangible.

So, here we are. Where? Well, Sue is on the mend (thank God, and thank you!), though there's still a longish healing process to go, and I feel that, in the past few days, my thoughts have crystallised. Some of you aren't going to like the conclusions that I have reached about my faith because it represents a major criticism of my Evangelical roots, but all I can honestly do is present what I think has gone wrong.

As those close to me well know, I've had a growing sense of excitement about my faith, and the tears have returned (big time!), as I've realised what the Lord has given me: a more beautiful faith, a more beautiful gospel, a more beautiful Good News that I can offer to anyone and everyone.

Now, I'm afraid this is going to come out as rather critical and negative, and I don't like doing that, but it has occurred to me that if some of the ideas I've been searching out this past six months are true, then mainline Evangelicalism has served us badly. I've put together here the negatives, but only so that we can realise what we have lost, and regain it, and thereby have a faith of which we can be really proud.

1) We have promoted salvation by penal substitution<sup>1</sup> as if it were ‘the gospel’. However, I now believe that the New Testament shows that the gospel – as preached by Jesus, Paul, Peter and all the early church – was simply the story of the life, death, resurrection, ascension and glorification of Jesus, as the fulfilment of the Old Testament scriptures. This view has been supported by my study of the church’s creeds, which say **nothing** about the ‘how’ of salvation: ‘for us and for our salvation’ was all we need, according to the church, for the first few hundred years.

Our over-emphasis on penal substitution started, I believe, around the time of the Reformation, and it has devalued the gospel and made it into a mechanism by which **I** can receive **my own** personal salvation, rather than being – as it was in the early church – the means by which **we** are brought back into **covenant relationship**<sup>2</sup> with God’s people (e.g. note how the Lord’s prayer is about ‘we’/‘our’, and not ‘I’/‘my’).

2) Our emphasis on penal substitution makes it all too easy to slide into picturing God as angry with us because we have sinned, and that if we don’t repent he will ‘send us to hell’. If we allow Jesus’ representation of God the Father to take precedence (as we should and must, if Jesus is The Word of God), then that view of God is, to my way of thinking, totally wrong.

Nowhere in the Gospels do I see a picture of God as wrathful – please correct me if I’m wrong. Can you see any anger in the Prodigal Father? I see only intense longing for his son to show even the slightest sign of returning, and then extreme rejoicing when the son returns.

But what about, for example, Matthew 5:29?! *If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.* Doesn’t this prove that God will throw us into hell if we sin? No! Jesus didn’t mean **literally** throwing into hell any more than he meant **literally** gouging your eye out. He was using a hyperbola – which he often did in his teaching (e.g. camel and needle’s eye). And he used images that would relate to the mindset of the people of his day, who **did** see God as throwing people into hell. So to counteract that view of God, Jesus repeatedly portrayed the Father as outrageously giving and forgiving, above all we ask or deserve! You can’t hold both views of God – they are simply not compatible.

So, the concept of hell, real as it may be, is not where God **sends** us; it’s where we will go if we continue to reject his free and loving gift of forgiveness and new life – a very different picture of God, a more Christ-like God.

Try this as just a dim reflection of the way God looks at us. We recently had a lady in our lounge in floods of tears over her middle-aged son who, because of his life choices, is effectively killing himself. In her love for him, is she angry with him for ‘sinning’? Of course not! And can God’s love for us be any **less** than this lady’s love for her son?

The Bible, from end to end, portrays God’s incredible love for us, and so, if we believe in the God that Jesus showed us, any talk of God’s wrath has to be seen as the way God’s heart is torn apart as we reject his love. And God is heart-broken because he is unable – yes unable! – to force us to accept that love. If he forced us, it wouldn’t be love, but coercion.

3) Our over-emphasis on penal substitution has also devalued the cross itself. There are so many glorious ways in which we can picture the work that Jesus did there for us, so why do we have to concentrate on only one of them?! What’s more, penal substitution is a metaphor that speaks of **retribution** (which we emphasise by totally misreading ‘the wages of sin’<sup>3</sup>), whereas the other biblical metaphors speak of restoration.

As I covered in my *The gospel – a panoramic view II*,<sup>[35]</sup> the Bible pictures the cross primarily as healing, but there’s also lost-and-found, restoration, redemption and jubilee, ransom, atoning sacrifice, the Lamb of God – a kaleidoscope of beautiful pictures in which we can revel.

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<sup>1</sup> Penal substitution is the view of salvation that pictures Jesus’ death on the cross as paying the penalty that we deserve for our sins. It is as if he is dying instead of us – he is our substitute.

<sup>2</sup> I can also now see how and why so much time and effort – not to mention heartache – has been wasted on arguments about infant baptism. You can see how the problem arose: if a baby dies will it go to heaven or hell?!

<sup>3</sup> We read it as if God were ‘paying’ us what we deserve – death! Rather God is trying to warn us: ‘If you sin, the inevitable consequence is death’. Please read the rest of Paul’s sentence – nay, shout it out! ‘...**but the free gift of God...**’!

4) We have wrongly insisted on calling the Bible ‘the word of God’. This is a smaller point, but not insignificant. Only Jesus is the word of God – the one through whom God spoke and it was created, and who speaks to us today. The Bible is extremely important – nay, essential – because it tells us about **THE** word of God – Jesus; but it is not of itself the word of God (see *What is the Bible? II*<sup>[41]</sup>).

5) We have said, or implied, that the Bible is infallible (*What is the Bible? II*<sup>[41]</sup>). If it’s a translation we’re reading, then it certainly can’t be infallible, because those words are the creation of fallible humans, albeit hopefully inspired by the Holy Spirit. But even the original Greek and Hebrew can’t, in my view, be infallible for the following reasons:

(a) It was written by fallible humans, and God did not turn them into robots, forcing them to write certain specific words.

(b) It clearly contains some mistakes, which we ought to honestly acknowledge, rather than glossing over them.

(c) In a few places, it portrays God in ways that go against the way Jesus portrayed God (wrathful, rather than forgiving), and I believe that what Jesus said – as **The** Word of God – takes precedence over the words written by the Bible’s authors. (Actually, many of these apparent contradictions can easily be understood if you acknowledge that the authors wrote – could not help but write – in the context of the currently accepted norms and knowledge bases.)

By saying that the Bible is infallible, we have devalued it, especially in the minds of outsiders to the faith – how can they be expected to take it seriously?! We play right into the hands of detractors such as Richard Dawkins.

So, I’m sorry if you feel that I’ve been negative, but it’s only so that I can point anyone and everyone to Jesus, and people only have to ‘meet’ Jesus to discover what God is like and to realise that God is so amazing that I wonder that not everyone bows the knee to him as Christ.

I started this writing journey (odyssey?) in *Rebuilding my faith*<sup>[1]</sup> by pointing out that if penal substitution is our primary model, if ‘the gospel’ is just about salvation, then before we can give people ‘the good news’, we first have to get them to sit and listen to ‘the bad news’ – sin and a holy God. And how do we get them to listen to that essential precursor to ‘the good news’? We give them hell!

Our faith message has become – ‘Look out! You’re heading for hell! Repent and believe the Good News!’ That might attract some people, but others just can’t take it seriously and still others are repulsed by it. ‘It’s nice for you, but I just don’t feel the need.’

Our faith message could (should?) be, ‘Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?’ (John 4:29) – in other words, ‘I’ve met someone who has transformed my life. He’s simply amazing! Come and see for yourself.’

I know that some of you reading this are church leaders who are desperately concerned about discipleship: people get saved, but then they don’t grow as Christians. How can we get them to read the Bible and pray and witness to their friends?!

The answer to that is exactly the same: ‘Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?’ (Jn 4:29) Invite them into this glorious covenant.

Since I’ve really met Jesus these past six months, I can’t seem to stop reading my Bible and talking about my new-found faith, and I’ve recently even started praying because I’m coming to believe that God is actually unable to work in this world unless we pray (but I’m still working through this idea).

Apologetics?! Whose idea was that?! There’s absolutely no need to apologise for such

## Wonderful GOOD NEWS!

Paul Bev. 24.2.19

## 43 “Feast on God’s word”

If I’ve learnt nothing else on this journey, it’s this: “*Don’t just believe what you’ve been told!*”

What have you been taught to think when you hear “Feast on God’s word”?

Or “Let’s get into the word”?

Or the much quoted “The word of God is living and active”?

Can you avoid making the equation: **the word of God = the Bible**?

I tried last time to suggest that it would be more biblical to make this equation:

**the word of God = the gospel = Jesus**

Now read that Hebrews passage again:

*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Heb 4:12)*

So it’s the **person of Jesus** that is living and active, **not** the Bible. I can get really excited about that! I really believe it. I’ve experienced it. And I’ve never, ever studied the Bible more than I have this past wonderful six months, having met **the** word of God.

But don’t take my word for it. Read the scriptures and decide for yourself.

The Old Testament uses the expression over 200 times, and it’s almost always about God speaking. I’ll just quote one example:

*The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days **the word of the LORD** was rare; there were not many visions. (1 Sam 3:1)*

So here below are the New Testament uses that I’ve found. **Feast on these scriptures**, and as you do, my prayer for you is that your faith will be enlivened, and that these scriptures will inspire you and thrill you and draw you closer to our wonderful Saviour, Jesus – **the Word of God**.

Paul Bev. 2.3.19

Matthew 15:1 Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!” Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honour your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,’ he is not to ‘honour his father [or his mother]’ with it. Thus you **nullify the word of God** for the sake of your tradition.

Luke 5:1 One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding round him and **listening to the word of God**, he saw at the water’s edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets.

Luke 8:9 His disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, “‘though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.’ “This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is **the word of God**.

Luke 11:28 He replied, “Blessed rather are those who **hear the word of God** and obey it.”

Acts 4:31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and **spoke the word of God** boldly.

Acts 6:2 So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the **ministry of the word of God** in order to wait on tables. ... They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So **the word of God** spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Acts 8:14 When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had **accepted the word of God**, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus. ... 25 When they had testified and proclaimed the **word of the Lord**, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.

Acts 11:1 The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received **the word of God**.

Acts 12:24 But **the word of God** continued to increase and spread.

Acts 13:5 When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed **the word of God** in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper. ... The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear **the word of God**.

Acts 13:44 On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the **word of the Lord**. 45 When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak **the word of God** to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: “‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’” When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the **word of the Lord**; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. The **word of the Lord** spread through the whole region.

Acts 16:35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the **word of the Lord**. Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the **word of the Lord** and see how they are doing.”

30 He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.” Then they spoke the **word of the Lord** to him and to all the others in his house.

Acts 17:13 When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching **the word of God** at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up.

Acts 18:11 So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them **the word of God**.

Acts 19:10 This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the **word of the Lord**. ... In this way the **word of the Lord** spread widely and grew in power.

Romans 10:8 But what does it say? “The **word is near you; it is in your mouth** and in your heart,” that is, **the word of faith we are proclaiming**: That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”... 16 But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is **heard through the word of Christ**.

2 Corinthians 2:17 Unlike so many, we do not peddle **the word of God** for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.

2 Corinthians 4:1 Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. 2 Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort **the word of God**. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.

Eph 1:13 And you also were included in Christ when you **heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation**. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,

Eph 6:17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is **the word of God**.

Phil 1:14 Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak **the word of God** more courageously and fearlessly.

Phil 2:14 Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you **hold out the word of life** – in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour for nothing.

Col 1:5 the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already **heard about in the word of truth, the gospel** that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth. ... 25 I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you **the word of God** in its fulness – the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints.

Col 3:16 **Let the word of Christ dwell** in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

1 Thess 2:13 And we also thank God continually because, when you received **the word of God**, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, **the word of God**, which is at work in you who believe.

1 Tim 4:4 For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by **the word of God** and prayer.

2 Tim 2:14 Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against **quarrelling about words**; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly **handles the word of truth**.

Titus 2:5 [Teach them] to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no-one will malign **the word of God**.

Heb 4:12 For **the word of God** is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Heb 6:4 It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of **the word of God** and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

Heb 13:7 Remember your leaders, who spoke **the word of God** to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.

James 1:17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through **the word of truth**, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

1 Peter 1:23 For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through **the living and enduring word of God**. For, “All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the **word of the Lord** stands for ever.” And this is **the word that was preached** to you.

2 Peter 1:18 We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have **the word of the prophets** made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

1 John 1:1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this **we proclaim concerning the Word of life**.

1 John 2:14 I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and **the word of God lives in you**, and you have overcome the evil one.

Revelation 1:1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw – that is, **the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ**. ... 9 I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of **the word of God and the testimony of Jesus**.

Rev 6:9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of **the word of God and the testimony** they had maintained.

Rev 19:11 I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no-one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and **his name is the Word of God**.

Rev 20:4 I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of **the word of God**.

## **44 What is the Bible? (III) – How does God communicate?**

*(This is now the third time that I've tried to write about how to interpret the Bible in light of the way Jesus interpreted the Old Testament. Each time, I get hijacked into another issue. Hopefully, in 'What is the Bible? (IV)', I'll eventually get there!)*



OK, so we've decided for definite that God is a God who communicates; indeed, God **is** communication. Within God's very nature – as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the three persons are in mutual love and communication. And because God loves **us**, he wants to communicate with **us**, to share that love.

*Question:* How does God communicate with us?

Does God speak through nature? Yes, why not? Through circumstances? Yes. Through friends? Of course. By using an audible voice? Sometimes, I believe. By angelic visitation? In Bible times definitely; in modern times too, so I gather. Through dreams? Yes, definitely. By waking people up in the middle of the night and seeding ideas in their brains? Yes, I have first-hand experience of that!

And what about visions and prophecies, words of knowledge and words of wisdom? Yes, there's good biblical precedent for that. What about through poetry? biblical novels? paintings? sculpture? inspiring architecture? stained glass? banners? silence? Dare I even suggest church vestments and religious symbolism? What about all the different styles and traditions of music? The list is endless!

God is clearly **absolutely desperate** to communicate his love to us!

But God can only communicate with us to the extent that (a) we believe that God **wants** to speak to us, and (b) we are prepared to **listen**.

*“Hang on, Paul! What about God speaking through the Bible? You haven't mentioned that.”*

Well, yes, sorry; I had taken that as read. (Ha ha!)

*“Surely, that's the **main** way that God speaks to us?”*

Why do you say that?

*“Because those other ways in which you say God ‘communicates’ all need to be tested. The Bible gives us objective truth against which we can check things. This will stop us getting things wrong on the basis of ‘God told me to do such and such’.”*

Nice idea! But when I was in that sect for all those years, we studied the Bible every single time we met, and yet we most definitely went off the rails!

But does the Bible indeed give us **objective truth** against which we can check things? Does it give us a set of factual statements about God? Does it say, “God is like this, and God is not like that” or “God says we should do this, and not do that”?

*“Well, no, not quite as simply as that.”*

OK, so **does** God use the Bible to convey truth? Yes, of course! But **how**?

Did the Jesus of the Bible convey truth? Yes, of course! So how did Jesus convey truth?

Jesus used metaphors, he used similes, he used parables and he used hyperbolae (‘If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off.’) [It's just occurred to me that he also used physical actions, such as touch.]

But is it possible to convey truth by using metaphors, similes, parables and hyperbolae? Well, I jolly well hope so, otherwise Jesus was totally wasting his time, wasn't he?!

So my question is: Can you convey **objective** truth by using metaphors, similes, parables and hyperbolae? The problem is that those forms of communication all need to be interpreted, so bang goes any objectivity!

*“First you challenge traditional Evangelical beliefs by arguing that the Bible is not infallible, and now you're trying to ditch the idea that the Bible contains objective truth that we can use to decide what's right and wrong!”*

Yes, that is exactly what I'm doing, sorry.

*"Well, you've got a very low view of the Bible, Paul!"*

Really? If I had a low view of the Bible then surely I'd ignore it, wouldn't I? In fact, I have never, ever studied the Bible as much as I have of late – I look forward to reading the Bible. And I've never been more aware of changing how I think about God, how I relate to God and how I relate to other people. I'd say I have a higher than ever view of the Bible.

The problem, as I see it, is this: If you believe that the Bible contains objective truth – and especially if you believe that God will have your guts for garters if you misinterpret it – then that **fear** will lead you into a more literal interpretation, indeed an over-literal interpretation, and that's really dangerous. You will tend to study the Bible in order to find out what's right and what's wrong, who's out and who's in. I know – that's what I did for the first 48 years of my Christian life; and I would have made a first-rate Pharisee!

Searching the scriptures for objective truth is, first of all, a waste of time: you can't know objectively what God is like. This is God we're talking about! How can anyone 'explain' God?!

Secondly, searching the scriptures for objective truth can, as I've said, lead to an over-literal interpretation, and that can lead to the kind of judgementalism that Christians are (rightly, I fear) accused of by the media and by society in general. The Bible is not there primarily 'to teach us right from wrong'; it's there to help us to find a way back to God and back to one another when we do go wrong. When Jesus was on earth his main focus wasn't 'to teach people right from wrong', rather it was to help people find forgiveness and restoration when they did go wrong.

Paul Bev 4.3.19

## ***45 What is the Bible? (IV) – Relationship-based interpretation***

Thanks for walking with me on my journey as I've travelled through from wondering 'does God exist even?' to challenging 'what I've always been taught but was unhappy about', through to 'now this I really **can** believe' and the joy that this has brought to me and to Sue.

Actually, I haven't said, but Sue too has been on a journey – a separate and different journey – starting while I was on my wild goose chase in that sect. We've come through to a togetherness that we've not really known before, and we are both happy now to recommend to anyone this 'more beautiful gospel'.

Over the past six months, I have tried, as a non-theologian, to make sense of both 'what I've always been taught' and 'what I am now beginning to believe', and although words are inadequate I've tried to share them. So here's where I've come to, as far as the Bible is concerned:

God IS relationship (love) – three persons in one God. We are invited into that relationship. Over the generations, God has tried to **tell** us about this relationship, but '*in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son*'.

So, what is the main purpose of the Bible? – To point us to Jesus.

What is the main purpose of the Old Testament? – To point forward to Jesus.

The main purpose of the New Testament? – To tell us all about Jesus.

The main purpose of the Gospels? – To 'tell out the good news': what Jesus said and did.

The main purpose of the rest of the New Testament? – To tell us more about relating to Jesus.

Sadly, we humans tend to view the Bible as showing us 'what's right and wrong'. Tragically, this has occupied much of church history, and has resulted in persecution, hatred, wars and torture, all justified by our (wrong?) interpretation of the Bible.

Who can blame people for rejecting Christianity when they see just how much pain and suffering has been caused by people in the name of ‘what the Bible teaches’?!

But clearly it’s not ‘what the Bible teaches’, but rather it’s how we **interpret** what the Bible teaches. That must be so, by definition, because sometimes it’s two groups of Christians killing one another on the basis of ‘what the Bible teaches’.

OK, so all the Bible gives us is a bunch of words on the page. Words are very powerful, but they can be misleading, because they have to be interpreted by humans to work out their meaning.

It seems to me there are two main ways to come to a **wrong** interpretation: metaphor and culture.

**Metaphor:** *‘If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off.’ or ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple.’*

**Error:** taking it too literally. All writing is metaphorical to some extent, simply because words aren’t the real thing; they are symbols on a page, trying to express truth. And if we’re trying to explain ‘what God is like’, the difficulty is even greater.

**Culture:** *‘Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him?’* **Error:** taking advice given in one era, in one culture, in one country, and trying to apply it literally here and now, in today’s culture.

A linked error (probably more controversially) is not being willing to take account of the knowledge that humankind has accumulated. We need to be willing to say, ‘Years ago people didn’t realise the damage that such-and-such can do to people, so they thought it was OK. Now we know better, so we need to change our interpretation.’

But if we’re to avoid these errors, we need to know **how** to interpret any given passage: how literally should we take it, and how much did the cultural setting affect the author’s viewpoint?

The key to good interpretation is God, is the nature of God, is the nature of God-as-relationship.

For me, Jesus is the only ‘Word of God’, and he trumps our interpretation of scripture. So if a passage seems to show God in any way **other** than the character of Jesus, or in any way **other** than the character of the Father that Jesus told us about, then our interpretation must be wrong.

So if, for example, I see some scripture apparently portraying God as wrathful or vengeful, then my interpretation must be wrong because Jesus was not wrathful or vengeful, and neither was the Father he told us about.

The ‘wrath thing’ was probably my biggest sticking point in understanding the Bible, hence I’ve already written three articles about it (8, 14 and 18), and while I’ve come to a personal place of peace about it, I still think I need to do some more work on it. (Any feedback would be much appreciated.)

Finally, if we’re to go down this road of relationship-based interpretation, we’re going to have to do a lot of questioning; we’ll need to read scripture and challenge what it **seems** to be saying, or to challenge what we’ve always been told that it means.

And if you’re in a church that frowns on challenging (this church’s view on) the meaning of scripture, then I’d say it’s time for you to look for another church. (Gasp!) How can it be wrong to faithfully (meaning: having faith in Jesus) challenge scripture? You are challenging it in order to understand it better, in order to grow closer to Jesus and to make Jesus better known. We need to be in the kind of relationship with fellow believers where we can agree to disagree about aspects of the meaning of scripture without feeling others’ disapproval.

I have only been able to grow in my faith because I found myself in a church that actively encourages creative engagement with the meaning of scripture.

Forty-eight years of ‘being right’ didn’t do me half so much good as two years of being willing to be wrong!

## ***46 The scandal of the cross***

What are your thoughts, feelings, images, ideas when you think of 'the cross'? How would you explain it to someone who asked, "What's that all about?!"

Why not pause for a moment and think about that?

If the person before you seemed to be a serious enquirer, then what? Suppose they said, "Why do you Christians concentrate on the torture and death of Jesus? Why is it so important to you that you put huge crosses all over the place?"

How would you answer that?

I think I'd first want to say that the death of Jesus wasn't the end, but that God brought him back to life.

The Paul of 2+ years ago would probably then 'tell them the gospel', I'd tell them how Jesus' death was the punishment that I deserve...etc...etc.

Now I'm not so sure.

I have an idea! Let's ask the Paul of almost 2000 years ago what he would say...

1 Corinthians 1:10. I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. 11 My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. 12 What I mean is this: One of you says, "**I follow Paul**"; another, "**I follow Apollos**"; another, "**I follow Cephas**"; still another, "**I follow Christ**." 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised into the name of Paul?

**[Can you imagine how Paul would react to the total and utter scandal of the way Christians have fought and killed and tortured one another in the name of 'THE TRUTH'?! And even if we don't kill each other physically these days, we do ridicule each other's views.]**

14. I am thankful that I did not baptise any of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so no-one can say that you were baptised into my name. (16 Yes, I also baptised the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptised anyone else.)

17. For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to **preach the gospel** – not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. 18 For the message of **the cross is** foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is **the power of God**.

**[I think we've robbed the cross of its power, as I'll explain in a minute. (And more next time.)]**

19 For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." 20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. 22 Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 but **we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles**, 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, **Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God**. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. 26 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But **God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no-one may boast before him.** 30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 31 Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

1 Corinthians 2:1. When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. 2 For **I resolved to know nothing** while I was with you **except Jesus Christ and him crucified**. 3 I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. 4 My message and my preaching were **not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power**, 5 so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

If I'm a good Protestant, I insist on a cross, not a crucifix! Don't depict Jesus on the cross – that's idolatry – use an empty cross, because Jesus rose from the dead.

If I'm a good Evangelical, I'll bring to mind the gospel presentation that I was taught, so that I can explain how the cross takes away our sin and allows us free access into heaven.

Yes, but what would Paul do? I think he would 'preach the gospel'. In other words, he would tell them the story – tell them what actually happened, and let the power of the gospel, the power of the narrative speak into the heart of the person he's talking to.

Part of the problem is that we've sanitised the cross, we've robbed the cross of its utter scandal: Christ crucified! The Messiah, the anointed of God, the chosen one, the mighty conqueror, who was coming to reign in power and great glory was CRUCIFIED. Can you begin to see how that's totally **shocking**?!

And no, I'm not talking about the physical suffering of Jesus, as terrible as that was. It's the traditional evangelist who uses that as the **shock**, giving us graphic detail of what scourging entailed, and that terrible crown of thorns – and this was caused by your sin and mine! So we need to repent and believe to have our sins forgiven!

What persuasive words those are! Yes, exactly! They are 'persuasive words', just like Paul says in 1 Cor 2:4 **NOT** to use!

We have reduced Jesus' work on the cross to a mechanism by which **my** sins can be forgiven so that **I** can get into heaven. We've made it 'nice'; it's NOT, it's totally shocking!

Physical pain, yes, but it's the total shame of the cross that we need to understand afresh. To the New Testament mind, it was just awful, the idea of someone stripped naked and hung up on a pole for everyone to laugh and jeer at.

I'm sorry for saying this, but it's a bit like (please forgive me, Ma'am) Her Royal Highness Queen Elizabeth II being led through the streets of London stark naked!

Does that help you to feel just how totally jarring 'Jesus Christ and him crucified' would have felt to the first people who heard it?

There's a lot more to be said on this topic, but that's enough for now.

Paul Bev. 10.3.19

## ***47 The scandal of the cross (II)***

My claim is that, in the New Testament, to 'preach the gospel' means to tell the story of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies.

As I see it, that is the whole purpose of the Bible, to get the message of the gospel across to us. And at the centre of the gospel is the cross which, as I tried to depict last time, is totally and utterly shocking!

The familiar story of the disciples on the Emmaus road, has come across to me today with incredible power. (Yes, I know this is meant to Lent, not Easter. Sorry, but I can't help it!) Just think how they felt!

They had actually been with Jesus and they **knew** for a certainty that Jesus was the **Messiah** – they had seen the lame walk, the deaf hear, etc. in exact fulfilment of loads of (Old Testament) scriptures. And Jesus spoke with such authority! Can you imagine their growing excitement? Clearly, this was the Messiah. Yes, he had said something about dying, but they weren't really listening. Like us, they heard what they wanted to hear and ignored the rest!

He [the stranger = Jesus] asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” They stood still, their faces downcast. (Luke 24:17)

‘Downcast’? **Is that the understatement of the (first) century?!**

- Their closest friend had just died. (Bad enough on its own?)
- Nay, their closest friend had just been **flogged, publically humiliated and murdered.**
- Nay, **God’s Messiah** (so they thought) had just been flogged, publically humiliated and murdered.

And they were **really** confused because some of the other disciples were saying that Jesus had come back to life. Crazy! They had seen him die, remember.

The stranger then says, “*How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?*” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (24:25-27)

At the very least, he would have done a Bible study on Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53, but it does say, “*Beginning with Moses...*”. And gradually they would have seen scriptures that began to make sense of what had happened. Maybe it wasn’t a defeat after all?

*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. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight. (24:29-31)*  
Can you imagine how they felt NOW?! “Where has he gone?! That was Jesus! He really **IS** alive!”

Have you ever wondered why Jesus legged it at that point? It feels a bit heartless, doesn’t it? Once they realised it was him, they’d have had so many questions they wanted to ask him, and it would have been great just to sit and gaze at him. What an amazing evening that would have been for them.

But then follows one of my favourite verses in the Bible (v32): *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?”*

Maybe **this** is the understatement of the (first) century?!

They simply **had** to share this good news!

*They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” (24:33,34)*

They had no need for atonement theology. Jesus is alive! Death has been defeated! That’s good news. That’s fantastic news! That’s gospel.

(But I’ll be back with some atonement theology soon.)

Paul Bev. 10.3.19

## **48 The scandal of the cross (III) – Help, please!**

This article is, in a sense, just revision of ideas from earlier articles, but because those ideas are so different from the perspective that Evangelicals have grown up with, I feel it’s important to lay the groundwork again so that we can build on it, in order to search for better ways in which to communicate the gospel to friends and loved ones here and now. If they don’t know the Saviour – and don’t even realise they need a Saviour – then it’s desperately important for us to do all we can to communicate the gospel in a way that they can appreciate.

I hope you think that I'm on at least vaguely the right lines here, but if not, I'm not saying that you're 'wrong', and I do hope and pray that you will do all you can, like me, to communicate the love of God to those around you. So let's see how much common ground we can find...

My view is that the Bible contains many different types of literature from many different cultures, written over hundreds of years, yet it has an amazing consistency. At its heart, the Bible is a narrative, a story – a very powerful story – of the relationship between the God-who-is-relationship, the God who is love, and the people whom God created.

I believe that the very centre of the whole Bible – indeed, the centre of the whole of history – is the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

The Old Testament looks forward in various prophetic ways to the cross, prefiguring what God was going to do 'at the right time'. The New Testament then tells us about that good news, the gospel, the story of what actually happened at that time.

So the Bible depicts the cross as the centre of a narrative, a story, a true historical story, and this makes it a **timeless and culture-free** way of expressing how God provides the solution to humankind's fundamental problem of rebellion against God – how relationships can be restored, after we have broken those relationships, with God and with fellow humans.

Over the centuries and in different cultures, people have been able to articulate the work of Christ on the cross and have made it real to the people around them – that's how this narrative has been able to feed and nourish billions of people, inspiring them to great acts of love and service.

So hopefully there's nothing too heretical so far, but do you remember where I started this writing journey six months ago? I had just refound the joy of my relationship with this three-in-one God and I was desperate to share it, so I pleaded with all of you to help work out how to communicate it with those around us.

The problem was that I was unhappy about the way we had been trained to communicate God's love, in terms of what theologians call 'penal substitution'; it was difficult to communicate because it was predicated on the idea (the true idea, don't get me wrong!) that God is holy and we are sinners. Unless you start by accepting **that**, then Jesus' death on the cross for you, as a substitute, is meaningless and pointless.

Have **you** managed to find a way to communicate the idea of sin to your friends and family?!

At the time, I thought that the idea of penal substitution was just plain wrong; I have since moderated that view to saying that it really isn't the most helpful way of picturing what God achieved through the cross – not for today's culture, anyway. It's difficult to see how the unjust suffering of God's innocent Son, to satisfy God's need for someone to be punished, can be a solution to anything.

I then discovered that penal substitution is just one of a number of different metaphors that can help us to appreciate how the cross brings a solution to humankind's fundamental problem of relationship breakdown. (I prefer to call it 'relationship breakdown' rather than 'sin' because **everyone** understands what misery can be produced when relationships go wrong.)

So starting with an appreciation of the problem – relationship breakdown – we can then begin to show people how Jesus went about solving relationship problems. It's not in the least threatening to people if we talk to them about how Jesus related to people such as the woman caught in adultery (and her accusers) or the Samaritan woman at the well, and we could easily talk to them (nay, enthruse with them) about the God pictured in the parable of the prodigal son – a story they may well know already.

OK, at some stage, if they are interested (and if they aren't interested, we certainly shouldn't be trying to 'tell them the gospel'!) we're going to have to address the 'Yes, but how does knowing God help?' or 'How can God heal the pain in my heart from the way my ex-husband has treated me?' or 'How can I be forgiven for the awful things I've done in the past?'



But listen, folks! We need to have an answer for the questions **they are asking**, not try to give them the solution to a problem they don't even realise they've got!

Everyone is different (thankfully God knows that!), so a one-size-fits-all 'gospel presentation' is **not** the answer. The answer is to **LISTEN** to people, be with them in their pain and their brokenness, and **then** we'll have the opportunity to share our faith and tell them how the cross **does** have the power, fantastic power, to totally change lives.

But I'm not minimising the work we have to do. Having shaken off the idea that penal substitution is the panacea, we need to think out **how** the cross and resurrection are 'the answer' to any and every situation. Different images or metaphors will help different people at different times, so we need to think more widely about **how** the power of the cross works in people's lives.

Are any of you willing to work with me on this? Can we, together, think out how to help people to see how this beautiful gospel can transform their lives?

I'm certainly not going to stop working on this, but any feedback you have would be very much appreciated. Thanks!

Paul Bev. 11.3.19

## **49 The scandal of the cross (IV) – The suffering servant**

Which books of the OT are most quoted in the NT? A quick Goggle suggests (not surprisingly) Psalms as number 1, and then Isaiah. And which chapter is the most quoted? It has to be 53, and most notably here, in this very familiar passage from Acts 8:26ff:

*Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "**He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.**" The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with **that very passage of Scripture** and told him **the good news about Jesus**.*

What an amazing encounter! How does God spread the gospel to Ethiopia? God uses a chance meeting. Well, the *meeting* wasn't chance because Philip had his ears open and did what God prompted him to do. The 'chance' was that the chap was reading Isaiah 53. Let's do the same – well, I'll start from the end of the previous chapter.

However, I suggest that you don't read the rest of this article now – certainly not if you're just about to dash out of the house. Wait until you have some time and are in a receptive mood – receptive to the Lord, I mean. Stop and be silent before the Lord; expect to hear from God; expect to hear from the scriptures; expect to hear good news – very good news – and absorb it in your soul.

(I'm not sure if this will 'work', but try it and if it helps you, great; if not, nothing is lost.)

*Isaiah 52:13ff. See, my servant [Jesus] will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. [Quite right too! Jesus should be totally exalted.] Just as there were many who were appalled at him [Hang on! Surely something has gone wrong here.] – his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness [No, what a scandal! That can't be right!] – so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand. [This passage is clearly not about 'understanding'. God's way is totally upside down, contradictory even, but the passage that the eunuch is about to learn about is for **all people everywhere**, and it has the **power** to silence human authorities.]*

*Isaiah 53:1ff. Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? [‘You ain't gonna believe this! This is totally weird!'] He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. [A pathetic little weed?] He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. [We looked, but what we saw seemed to be totally worthless.]*

*Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, [God's in the business of healing, but healing in the very broadest sense.] yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. [We got totally the wrong end of the stick: we considered that **God** was killing Jesus. Wrong! But...] 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. [...what Jesus did was 'For us and for our salvation'. He took our infirmities (sicknesses) and sorrows (loss, bereavement), our transgressions and our iniquities; he took anything and everything that spoils life and he absorbed it into himself. In its place he gave us peace and healing (wholeness)!]*

*We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. [Conscious of personal sin? God will take it away. Conscious of being sinned against? Conscious of institutional sin? God will absorb that too.] He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. [Jesus didn't have to die; it was his settled choice to submit to the worst that humankind (the worst that we!) could throw at him. He submitted to religious violence to expose it for what it was. (A bit like the way Martin Luther-King et al. used non-violence to expose and utterly defeat racial intolerance.)]*

*By oppression and judgment he was taken away. [Not fair!] And who can speak of his descendants? [That's it then! This is the end!] For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. He was assigned a grave [He was dead and buried] with the wicked, and with the rich [Joseph of Arimathea] in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. [Totally unfair! Is there no justice?! Scandalous!]*

*Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, [It doesn't look good. Those disciples on the Emmaus road felt that Jesus' descendants were going to be scattered.] and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring [Hang on! Maybe this isn't the end of the story; maybe there's a final twist in the story.] and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. [**Resurrection!**] 11 After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light [of life] and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. [Hurrah! Aslan is in the land again!] 12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. [That is contrary to reason and contrary to normal justice. We should die for our own sins, surely? It's totally unjust for an innocent person to die for us; yet that's what God did. This is restorative justice. Don't try to understand it, just trust God, and receive.]*

So, what a glorious conclusion to this seemingly terrible tragedy: Jesus' life taken away by religious intolerance and religious violence. But in Jesus, God defeats the worst institutional violence. By the most awful human injustice imaginable – the scandal of the cross – God works out that incredible long-decided plan to bring the whole of humankind back into the wonderful relationship that is God, that is love, that is community, that is togetherness, that is restoration, that brings resurrection power, that is absolutely flipping marvellous!

No wonder the eunuch wanted to be baptised and then 'went on his way rejoicing'!

May you go on your way rejoicing today. Lord, let it be!

Paul Bev. 13.3.19

## 50 *The gospel is universal*

I feel as if, over the past few months, I've been journeying up a beautiful mountainside. This morning, as I continue to explore, I seem to be coming out into a place where there's a much broader panoramic view. The more I discover, the better it gets – all very exciting!

You're all being very patient with me, but please bear with me as I again retrace my personal journey of these past few years.

– In my sect, I was convinced that being right was really, really important, because those who weren't right simply wouldn't make it.

– I pulled out and then, for a few years, I rebuilt my faith in God along traditional lines.

– Then I (re-)discovered the Trinity and got really excited. As I had thought all along, God really **IS** relational and God is desperate to **include** people, not to exclude them. This is something worth sharing, right?!

– Recently, I've discovered that the gospel itself is **inclusive**. It is simply 'the story of Jesus' (in fulfilment of the OT, and as described in the NT), and so the gospel is **universal**, it transcends space, time, culture, ethnicity, gender; it's the same yesterday, today and forever. This is something **really** worth sharing, innit?!

Can you see why it's so, so exciting?! It means that Christians can unite around the universal truths – the ancient creeds, which spell out who God is as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that Jesus 'died and rose again for us'. We don't need to argue about minor details; rather, we can get on with 'preaching the gospel' in the widest sense of that phrase – just being Jesus in our communities, caring for others, spreading his love. And this transcends denomination. Praise God!

Now, do you remember, six months ago, I introduced you to my friend 'Martha', who was being strongly encouraged by her church to 'share the gospel' with her friends and family (F&F). She gives her life to her F&F, she serves them, she cares for them, she loves them, and yet she doesn't feel she can 'share the gospel'. 'I just can't bring myself to talk to them like that!'

So Martha now feels **guilty** because she thinks that she's not sharing the gospel with her F&F. And she's **full of fear** because she sees her F&F heading for hell – and it's all her fault!

Someone please tell me, where does that fear and guilt come from? Does it come from God? Or from some other source?

But what is it that **actually** stops Martha's friends and families from finding, appreciating and enjoying the love of God in Christ Jesus? Is it **really** because no-one is willing to tell them that they are sinners in need of a Saviour? Or is it some or all of the following?

- seeing the constant in-fighting between denominations, between churches, within churches?
- our insistence that <blank> behaviour is wrong? <insert any 'important biblical principle'>
- our judgemental attitudes as we 'try to maintain standards'?
- our insistence that 'proper' church is Sunday worship in a building?
- our exclusion of women from church ministry (albeit that insistence is crumbling)?
- our attitude to certain minorities?

And can you see that, at the heart of those issues, is a concentration on who is right and who is wrong. But what is it that ruins human relationships? Blame and shame, lack of trust, insistence on being right. And that can all too easily be what we model in our churches, and so that's the image of God that we convey to our F&F: God will exclude you unless and until you accept 'what (we say) the Bible teaches'.

So what would you advise Martha to do? For a start, remember that 'perfect love casts out fear', so try to spend time with fellow Christians who aren't always obsessing about being 'right'. If you could actually **enjoy** your relationship with God, free from fear and guilt, that would be a pretty good start. It would make you a more attractive person, as you go about helping people (which I know you already do).

But I'm not unrealistic; it's not actually as simple as that. I think we still have some work to do. We still have a very narrow view of the cross – which is the centre point of the gospel, of course. By insisting on the 'right' view of the cross – the one single punishment-based view – we've robbed it of its full power to transform lives.

Sure, if our F&F have, like Martin Luther, a crushing realisation of their own sin, then the cross seen as Jesus taking the punishment for our sins is very, very good news. But how many of your F&F feel like Martin Luther? So if that is our **only** view of the work that Jesus did on the cross, we would **first** have to convince our F&F that they **do** have that desperate need, so we can then say: 'Ta da! Jesus is the answer! Good news, eh?!'

Why don't we actually find out what the perceived need is of our F&F? Do you think that God, through the cross, could meet that need? Well, I do!

So my Lenten efforts are being directed towards working out exactly **how** the cross can meet their needs. I want to work out how to 'always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...' (1 Pet 3:5)

*May you grow in your enjoyment of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and in your appreciation of the massive power of the gospel, and may you be a blessing to those around you, many of whom are struggling and need a real friend.*

**Lord, let it be!**

Paul Bev. 14.3.19

## **51 God's rescue plan?**

OK, so last time we left 'Martha' feeling guilty and afraid. She knows God's love in her life and wants to communicate it to her friends and family (F&F), but she doesn't feel that explaining how they are sinners in need of a saviour will actually help. She says they'll just think she's being judgmental, saying she's superior to them because they are 'terrible sinners'.

The problem is that unless our F&F see there's a **problem**, why would they bother looking for a **solution**?!

OK, so maybe we could ask them, 'Is life perfect? Is **your** life perfect? Are the lives of your F&F perfect? Is the life of the world perfect?' and at some point, they would see that, yes, there really is a problem in need of a solution. We can then ask them, 'If God were to exist, if God were a loving God, would God want to provide help?' It's a no-brainer! Of course God would do everything possible to help!

So, what have we got to offer them when they say 'OK, so **how** does God help?' Well, we have 'the gospel':

- The problem with the world is individual wrongdoing – we all do things wrong
- God has provided a solution: God sent Jesus to die, to give us free forgiveness
- So we can go to heaven

Sounds a bit 'thin', doesn't it? 'How is that going to solve **anything!**', they might reasonably ask.

This 'gospel' is based on a criminal/legal model of guilt and innocence. It says that even if we've done some terrible things in our lives – murder, even – it's OK because God will forgive us.

'So the man who abused me for all those years through my childhood just gets forgiven – just like that?!' says my friend 'Anuka'. But Anuka is self-harming and has attempted suicide more than once because she feels like a piece of s\*\*t. How is that 'gospel' going to help her? I can tell her that she's a sinner, in desperate need of forgiveness, but it's OK because God loves her and...

Forget it!

But does God **not** love Anuka?! Does God not have a solution?! Can God not restore Anuka?! Can God not convince Anuka that she really is loved and precious?!

Listen, folks, I'm not saying that the model of penal substitution is wrong; I'm just saying that while it helped Martin Luther to overcome his crushing sense of guilt for his own sin, we need something else if we're to reach out to our own F&F in language they can understand.

Martha is real (not called Martha, of course) but Anuka is made up, though she represents enough real situations. My own F&F are all lovely people, each in their own way doing something to sort out the mess of broken relationships. Have I anything to offer them? Thankfully, I have, and that's why I'm so fired up at the moment. The gospel, the real gospel, the more beautiful gospel, which is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus has **everything** to offer them.

Over the next few days I'll be offering some suggestions as to how the gospel can help Anuka, and also 'Bernard' whose life is a misery through no fault of his own, but through his severe ill health; he just can't believe in a God who would allow him to suffer as he does. And then there's 'Cherry', who is in a work situation, from which she can't escape for financial reasons, and it's grinding her down; she's basically being exploited by the system.

But take heart! God really does love us, God does love our F&F, and God **does** have plans to reach our F&F.

Watch this space!

(But if you want to find out what the next exciting episode is, then read 'Healing the Gospel' by Derek Flood. The next article will be based on his chapter 3.)

*Father God, please help us to trust you for our friends and family who don't yet know you. Please give us a way to communicate your amazing love to them.*

**Lord, let it be!**

Paul Bev. 15.3.19

## **52 God's rescue plan (II) – Salvation as healing**

*(Here I will only give you a description of this view of the gospel. I don't have space to support it with chapter and verse, but you'll find a biblical exposition in chapter 3 of 'Healing the Gospel' by Derek Flood, a book that I'd say is worth every penny and hour it would cost you.)*

To see where we're going on this, think of a bully's abusive behaviour; it is probably an attempt to deal with their underlying insecurity and feelings of worthlessness. But although that need is perfectly valid and understandable, their way of meeting that need, by devaluing and hurting others, is obviously not acceptable – it's sinful.

Clearly the cross can offer forgiveness for the actual sins that the bully has committed, for the way they have hurt other people, but that doesn't tackle the root cause. Thankfully, the cross can also provide healing – 'by his stripes we are healed' – and in this broader view, we see sin not just as crime to be punished but as sickness to be healed.

Jesus didn't only come to forgive sin, but to liberate us from everything that could separate us from God and life, and seeing sin as sickness is very much part of Jesus' ministry and teaching, as Flood demonstrates in his exposition. He also shows how it's part of Paul's teaching, as he brings justification and sanctification together.

So what are the root causes of that sin-as-sickness? Well, there are many things that can spoil a person's life and relationship with God in this broken world, full of sickness and tragedy. It's tempting to spend time analysing them (as I'm prone to try to do!), but suffice to say that some of what we suffer is at the hands of other people, and some is just what life throws at us – illness and physical death being the most obvious.

But seeing sin as sickness is not some kind of let-out clause. We can't just say, 'It's not my fault that I did such and such. It was because of what I've suffered at other people's hands.' If you think of physical disease, there are many factors, but we definitely have a personal responsibility to care for our own health. Thankfully, though, if we end up with heart disease, partly because we're overweight and have had a poor diet, the doctor won't turn us away when we need treatment, saying, 'Well, it's your own silly fault!'

What a glorious gospel we have to proclaim! On the cross, Jesus took upon himself the whole sad sorry mess of our lives, there providing a way through to wholeness, to salvation, dealing with the root causes of our sin!

In a sense, that's the end of my 'thought for the day', point made. However, I kept writing, and it seems that a second important idea has led out from it...

The story of the woman caught in adultery has become very special to me on my journey. When Jesus said to her, 'Neither do I condemn you; go now and leave your life of sin', he didn't then add '...or I **really will** condemn you!' What I think he was saying was 'Now that you have a relationship with me, I have dealt with the **root cause** of your sin. So now you can walk free; you can leave your life of sin – you are released!' And I think he might even have added, 'But if you do fall again, please don't panic, and certainly don't beat yourself up about it, just come straight back to me and receive forgiveness again.' What a glorious Saviour!

So yes, OK, that extra paragraph is very much part of what I was saying earlier, but my thoughts kept moving relentlessly on. (What a privilege I have to spend all this time revelling in the glories I find in scripture!) So here's how it went...

And do I hear in this an echo of Paul's argument in Romans about 'shall we go on sinning that grace may abound'?

But then I decided that I shouldn't risk quoting it out of context; I ought to go back and read that verse, Romans 6:1, and see what else Paul had to say. But then I found that it was all rather complicated – you know what Paul is like! So no, I decided that this idea was too much to get into just now.

But I'm so much enjoying looking at scripture from a relational point of view that I decided to read on further into Romans 6. What a glorious chapter! Paul explains how, through the cross ('united with Christ in his death') we can come to be united with him in his resurrection and live a new life, now!

But Paul (like me!) goes on, revelling in this new life, this new relationship, and he asks why would you even **think** of keeping on sinning? You'd be bonkers to do that, given the glorious alternative! Just **live** in this wonderful new life of righteousness and enjoy your relationship with Jesus (and with our people, I guess, though Paul doesn't mention that specifically here).

He continues by talking about how we can cultivate that relationship with Jesus and, (almost) finally, refers to 'the benefit you reap [that] leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life'. Hallelujah!

But that's the **penultimate** verse (22) of the chapter. So finally, finally we have verse 23:

## ***the wages of sin is death,***

but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I used to feel cross that people quote ‘the wages of sin’ and miss out the second half of that sentence, but now I realise that **the whole of the chapter(!)** is about how to cultivate our relationship with God. What an utter travesty of the scriptures to rip out that single six-word phrase and use it to ‘prove’ that **if you sin you will die** (and some preachers would even say, or imply, that you’ll die at the hand of God).

Now that has made me really angry! (Please forgive me.)

Put the phrase **back into the context** of our relationship with God, and Paul is saying that if we **do** sin it spoils our relationship with our loving heavenly Father. By sinning we pull ourselves away from God’s love (what a daft thing to do!), and if we **go on** sinning we’ll go further and further from God – and that is death. It’s sin, not God, that pays the wage.

OK, let me try to calm down, stop being cross, and apply that scripture back to our ‘naughty lady’. She has discovered the wonder and glory of a relationship with Jesus, who declares that she is released, freed from her life of sin. But he warns her, as Paul warns us in Romans 6, that as wonderful as that relationship is, we do need to make an effort to avoid sinning, otherwise we’ll slip away from that relationship and slide into ways that will tend to destroy our life.

*Father God, we rejoice at what you’ve done in Christ, as he died for us on the cross. Please help us day by day to appreciate it more and more (and please help Paul in his digging into the scriptures to find more nuggets to share with us).*

**Lord, let it be!**

Paul Bev. 16.3.19

## ***53 God’s rescue plan (III) – Christ’s loving sacrifice***

*(Once again I will only present here some ideas that I hope will enhance our view of the gospel. For a fuller biblical exposition, see chapter 4 of Derek Flood’s ‘Healing the Gospel’.)*

This stress on restoration and healing as a solution to the sin that ruins lives is all well and good, but are we ignoring all that the Bible teaches about sacrifice, ransom and Christ dying for our sins? Isn’t sacrifice about appeasing God’s anger, God’s wrath against our sin? Doesn’t Hebrews say that there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood?!

OK, one thing at a time! First, it’s only in pagan religions that sacrifice is supposed to appease the gods; that was never the intention in temple worship. And let’s be very clear, sacrifice does not make an angry God love us; nothing could **ever** make God love us more than he does already. You do believe that, don’t you? Otherwise we might as well give up and go home.

And is God actually ‘angry’ with his covenant people, anyway?! No, rather, because he loves them so much (check out Hosea, if you don’t believe me), he’s desperately sad (like my friend who wept over her son) that they are hurting themselves and others.

So it’s because God loved his people so much that he gave them sacrifices. And those sacrifices were an outward ritual that were intended to bring about an inner change, devotion and repentance. After all, God repeatedly says (words to the effect of), ‘I don’t want your sacrifices; I want an inner change of heart.’ So what’s all this stuff about blood?!



The writer of Hebrews, in reminding us about the Old Testament sacrifices, talks about being cleansed by blood, so when the people were cleansed by the sprinkling of blood, they were able to relate to God properly again. As they made their sacrifices, God took away their sin.

Is it mechanical? Is it automatic? Does making sacrifices somehow produce forgiveness? No, let's be clear, it was that God chose to take away their sins.

But the writer goes on to say that those sacrifices were imperfect and had to be repeated over and over again, and then he points us to that one perfect, sufficient sacrifice.

As I have come to understand it, Christ's blood cleanses us, which then allows us back into relationship with God back into his covenant, and that's the opposite way around from 'what we've always been taught'. We were told that Christ was punished for our sin **so that**, as a result, we could be forgiven.

Being an engineer I like to see it as a flow diagram. So we have either

Christ's death cleanses us from sin → we're forgiven → we can come back into God's presence  
OR  
Christ's death absorbs God's punishment → we're forgiven → we can be cleansed from sin

Personally, the first of those two sounds more like the God that Jesus portrays as, say, the prodigal father. However, for it to be true, and not just wishful thinking on my part, we need to ask, can Jesus' death take away sin, just like that? Of course it can! That theme runs right through both Old and New Testaments! Hallelujah!

But **how** does Jesus' death take away sins? First let's be clear that only God can do it; as in the Old Testament, so in the New Testament **only God can take away sins**.

Secondly, if you want to know exactly **how** Jesus' death take away sins, I'd have to say that we don't really know; it's a mystery. But the Bible gives us lots of clues; it gives us various ways of picturing it to help us to accept it, to receive it, to make it real in our lives.

At this point, some of you may respond that it can **only** be by substitution – Jesus dying in our place. But despite the engineer in me who likes to know exactly how things work, I don't believe that the Bible allows us to be that definite.

But the picture I'd like to share with you today, from the view I've expressed above, is that it's not the physical death, per se, that cleanses us. Rather, it's Christ's loving willingness to die for us; **that** is where the power lies; **that** is the power of the sacrifice that takes away sin.

Remember those two ladies who came to Solomon, each claiming that the one child was theirs? One mother was willing to sacrifice the baby if she couldn't get what she wanted; the other was willing, out of love for the child, to sacrifice her own desire to save the life of her child.

Can you see that as very pale reflection of what Christ gave up out of love for us!

But from Hebrews, we see that it's Jesus sacrifice, Jesus' blood that brings us back into God's covenant of love. Why not read it and see again the amazing gift that God gave us, as Jesus willingly and lovingly gave up his life for you and for me: *How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!* (Heb 9:14)

Actually, I suppose (and this is my sudden idea, not one that I got from Derek Flood's biblical exposition), in a sense, it was in the Garden of Gethsemane that our salvation was won, when Jesus said, 'Not my will but yours be done' and set his face to the cross. That was the point at which Jesus made his sacrifice for us. When he sweated

blood, that was, in a sense, the blood that cleanses us from sin, so that we can be forgiven and brought back into God's presence.

Let's keep questioning and keep digging into our Bibles; there are vast riches to be found as we look into how Jesus' death was the solution that God planned 'before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.'

*For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God. (1 Pet 1:18-21)*

Paul Bev. 17.3.19

## **54 God's rescue plan (IV) – How big is your cross?**

No, I'm not asking about the size of the wooden structure that you might have somewhere in your church, but rather how big is your view of what the cross signifies, of what the cross achieves. Certainly, since I started reading my Bible and understanding it in terms of relationships, the cross has grown and grown in importance for me. It's truly awesome, what God did there!

Unfortunately, I was brought up in a Christian culture that offered 'the gospel', which was 'how the cross saves you': Jesus died in my place, took the punishment I deserve, so I don't have to die – I can now be forgiven, and I can get to heaven. The cross was basically the means of personal salvation, and a 'cross-centred church' was one in which we 'preach the gospel' on a regular basis: we tell the congregation repeatedly about how they can be saved, and all our activities have to be 'gospel-centred', to tell non-church people how they can be saved.

But if the cross is simply and solely about Jesus dying in my place, why such a ghastly death? Surely, it would have been just as effective if Jesus had been hanged on a gallows or given a lethal injection – a nice clean, quick death – and Jesus would still be 'paying the penalty' for me.

Or did God provide the gruesomeness of a Roman cross (plus all the scourging and taunting and public humiliation) so that preachers could say, 'See just how much Jesus had to suffer for your sins and mine! Repent! Turn to Christ and be saved!' No, that's almost as much a misuse of scripture as quoting 'the wages of sin is death' out of context (article 52).

How have we managed to emaciate the cross into just being about personal salvation?! We're back to what I keep banging on about: (a) the whole of the Christian faith is about **relationship** (not about a mechanism of salvation) and (b) the gospel is the **narrative** of the saving purposes of God, from end to end (not a mechanism of salvation).

So does the new enlightened Paul Beverley now understand the true meaning of the cross and is he about to reveal it to you? No way! All I'm saying is that the cross is **so much more** than I could ever have imagined, and I want to share one aspect of it here (I've already shared other wonderful facets in earlier articles).

So, what is it about the nature of Jesus' death that increases its significance way beyond being just a means of personal salvation?

The awfulness of the cross is plain to see: the one perfect human that has ever existed (since the first Adam went off the rails) suffered a gross miscarriage of justice, was betrayed by one of his closest friends while others abandoned him and denied even knowing him, was horrendously physically tortured, publically stripped naked and humiliated, 'cursed' in the eyes of any believing Jew, and killed.

(By the way, don't be misled; when Jesus cried, 'My God, my God why have you abandoned me?!', although that was how he **felt** – and with good reason – I don't believe that God the Father **ever** abandoned him. How could he?! 'Can a mother forget the children she bore?' We can discuss scriptures, if you like, but I think it's not without reason that Paul says, 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.')

Where were we? Yes, OK, so God, in Jesus, received all the worst that any human could do to any other human. And on the cross God transformed that miserable defeat into the greatest triumph ever. God triumphed there over sin and death and, as Jesus rose from the death, opened the kingdom to anyone and everyone who is willing to accept Him.

On the cross, we see the cosmic Christ crowned in triumph! This is God's upside-down kingdom; God is in the business of taking the worst and transforming it into the very best.

So, if you're suffering in any way – pain, rejection, betrayal, anything – then (a) know that you're not alone – God has suffered worse, (b) God is also suffering as you suffer – God feels all of your pain, just as any loving mother would do, (c) have complete confidence that God is in the business of bringing good out of evil, and (d) try to find fellow believers who will welcome you unconditionally (as representatives of the God who has already accepted you unconditionally) – I can certainly put you in touch with a few such believers if you live in Norwich! :-)

God is perfectly capable of instantaneously taking away that suffering, but God wants the very best for you and the very best for all the people around you, and God knows what that very best is. So yes, do pray, tell God how you feel (as Jesus did) and ask for release from suffering for yourself and for others, but please don't ever give the impression to a fellow believer that if God doesn't answer their prayers in terms of taking their suffering away that they are somehow 'not doing it right', e.g. not praying with enough faith.

Sorry, but this is a bit of a hobbyhorse for me: I think a person's faith is just as strong, if not stronger, if they are willing to just pray and trust God for the outcome, whether it be miraculous release, or strength and joy in perseverance. (And you have good precedence: 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.')

Sorry, I got a bit distracted at the end there, but today's message is really that reading your Bible in terms of relationship, and looking at the narrative of the gospel and putting that alongside our day-to-day experience is life-changing – well, it certainly has been for me, and I hope and pray that you will find it a blessing too.

*Lord, let it be so!*

Paul Bev. 21.3.19

*(The above was inspired by chapter 9 of Derek Flood's 'Healing the Gospel'.)*

## **55 The gospel, Brexit and world domination**

I thank God for those of you who have been walking with me on my journey, especially Sue, for being patient with a husband who is totally obsessed. Interestingly, my son Tim has had an input, too. As vice-principal of an international school, he's working towards a PhD on educational issues. I've been thrilled that, as I've read some of his papers, it seems he's on a similar track to me, albeit in a secular environment.

His thesis is that schools aren't about teaching but about learning: the whole school must be a learning **community**, teachers, pupils and parents. It's not about who's right and who's wrong; it's about how we can all help one another to learn, in the broadest sense of that word. And we learn by being part of a community, by being in relationship with one another.

And what have I been learning through these exciting few months?! The gospel is not about who's right and who's wrong or who's in and who's out; rather it's about being a learning community, all growing together in our relationship with God and with one another.

Now, you can't get a much less political animal than me, but as I see it, the politicians and media can't stop themselves turning everything into a who's right and who's wrong exercise – we've become blame-fault-shame-obsessed. Frankly, if we can't manage to stop concentrating our differences and start working together, as a

community, across parties, in order to see how we can limit the damage, then we're going to be in a very, very serious mess (assuming it's not already too far gone).

So we need to pray desperately that God would help us and would inspire people to get off their high horses, start working together and protect the most vulnerable in society.

If I'm not political, I'm definitely not historical – I got a grade 9 at O level history (7, 8 and 9 were three different levels of failure). However, in my journey, I've been asking when, where and how did our view of 'gospel' turn into little more than a means of personal salvation, instead of being about a kingdom relationship? And here I wonder if I see a political link.

In the past, as I've looked at a world map – even one with the UK at the focus – and I've thought, 'How could this tiny group of islands ever have had such **massive** worldwide influence, through its colonial expansion?!' Amazing, isn't it?

And the other thing I've wondered at (and, if I'm honest, cringed over) is how the 'missionary expansion' came about. How much of a good thing was it that we took not just 'the gospel' (of personal salvation) but also education and medicine – and even more questionably our culture – and imposed them on such a huge range of different cultures, worldwide?

OK, I realise that all of the above is vague, wishy-washy thinking, but my feeling is that if we can rescue the gospel, the more beautiful gospel, the gospel of relationship, and help Christians and non-Christians alike to work together for the common good, we can hopefully make a real difference (and our Tim feels the same, secularly, within education).

'The church' in the time of those great missionary movements was very powerful, and now it's virtually powerless (in the UK, anyway). Why? Well, I think it's largely because we've concentrated so much on who's in and who's out, including which **church** is in and which is out. What a scandal that so much time and effort, not to mention bad feeling and even hatred, has accompanied the 'growth' of the church into its myriad, mutually incompatible denominations, sub-denominations and even non-denominations.

We have forgotten that the church was there to draw people in, regardless, full stop. We're here to include people, not to exclude them (as Jesus did?!). And our separating into denominations is largely motivated by fear: if we don't specify carefully enough what's right and what's wrong, who's in and who's out, then God won't bless us.

I praise God for the disparate community of people that I'm part of, here in Taverham; we come from various denominations and none, and are there because, when they stuck their head through the door of the church (and were at the time in a 'bad place', for one reason or another) they were welcomed, loved, accepted for who they were, and not told that they had to change in order to be accepted. And then – surprise, surprise! – as soon as they meet someone else who sticks their head through the door, they make damn sure this new person feels welcomed!

But I am very worried about Brexit, and I should be praying more that we get a workable solution. And if it really goes seriously wrong, then we, as those who have experienced God's loving welcome, will have an even bigger job to do to protect the most vulnerable. If the price of food rockets, and the rich grab the lion's share, to protect their own families, the outcome could be devastating.

To come back to something Tim wrote, as part of the underlying rationale for his educational ideas:

*...consider the way we frame our dominant global economic system, replete with concepts of **scarcity and accumulation**. If these conceptual foundations were transformed to notions of **abundance and gift** the implications for research and development of the system would be profound (Eisenstein, 2011).*

(The reference is to a book called 'Sacred Economics'.)

High-flown educational language, maybe (this was from a paper written in support of Tim's application to a school in Florence), but can you see the idea? If we share, there's enough to go around, but if we are selfish and just protect our own, then we create scarcity, and the poor starve. And can you see how the idea of 'abundance and gift'

is almost synonymous with the gospel, while ‘scarcity and accumulation’ are trademarks of the ‘who’s in and who’s out’ way of thinking?

Paul Bev. 22.3.19

## 56 Who needs evangelists?!

In the mid 80s, we had a PCC meeting about evangelism. We talked about different types of evangelistic campaigns, but at one point I said, ‘You know, if we really **believed** what we say we believe, and if we put it into **practice**, we wouldn’t need campaigns; people would come to us and ask why we were so different!’ The response was, ‘Thank you, Paul. What other ideas have people got, please?’

I think that was around the time that some of the homegroups did Colin Urquhart’s course, ‘How to love and be loved’ which, coming from a dysfunctional family, really set me alight. I went into the local bank one day and the cashier said, ‘My word, you’re looking very happy today!’ and my response was, quite spontaneously, ‘Yes, I’ve just come to realise that God actually loves me!’ and then I added, ‘Oh, and he loves you too, of course!’

So, what about evangelism/evangelists? Do we need it/them? What does the Bible teach?

Remember that on my journeying I’ve come to believe that (as I said in article 54) (a) the whole of the Christian faith is about **relationships** (not just a mechanism for personal salvation) and (b) the gospel is the **narrative** of the saving purposes of God, from end to end (not just a mechanism for personal salvation). I’m finding that this perspective is transforming my reading of the scriptures, so I applied it to evangelism.

Surprisingly, in my NIV, ‘evangelism’ is non-existent, and ‘evangelist’ occurs only three times, the first of which tells us nothing useful: *Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. Acts 21:8.* (Remember Philip? He was the chap that God told to go and run beside the chariot of the Ethiopian official.)

The other two references are:

*It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers* (Eph 4:11)

*But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.* (2 Tim 4:5)

How ever did we get from that to the dictionary definition of ‘a person who seeks to convert others to the Christian faith, especially by public preaching’?!

Are there any church historians and/or NT Greek scholars who are reading this? I’d love to know when and how our current conception of evangelism/evangelist came to be accepted as ‘what we’ve always been taught’, when it doesn’t seem to be what the Bible actually teaches!

All I can offer you is that the root of ‘evangelist’ as ‘evangel’ = ‘gospel’ = ‘good news’ – the story of Jesus. So maybe an evangelist in the original biblical sense is just a story-teller – someone good at remembering and telling the story of Jesus, and few people could read and write in those days, of course.

(I’m hoping that there’s more than one OTB presenter who is reading this. By this definition, you’re actually an evangelist – telling the story of Jesus to people who have never heard it!)

Philip is the only person I could find (apart from Timothy, and he wasn’t **just** an evangelist), so I’ve looked up all the references to him. The only thing that stood out to me was the link between telling the story and healings and divine guidance (as per Acts 8).

I've always had a strong urge to tell people about Jesus, but there are a couple of negatives I've always felt about evangelism.

First, there have been times when people have either rejoiced that someone has become a Christian, or have deliberately tried to reach people, because 'they are people of influence' – celebrities or secular leaders. That has always made me cringe – but the core of the idea is seeing evangelism as persuading people to believe.

And the other thing I cringe at is the idea of deliberately trying to form relationships with people with the specific aim of 'reaching them for Christ'. So if they prove resistant to the gospel (mind you, which 'gospel' are they resistant to?!) do we then stop trying to maintain that relationship?

If evangelism to me was once about persuading people to believe (what I believe), then I am now changing to see it being more about listening – in two ways.

First, we need to be listening to people, to hear where they are really at, what they believe, what they don't believe, who they are, what hurts them. And then maybe we can apply some aspects of the gospel narrative to their situation?

Secondly, we need to be listening to God, as Philip did in his evangelism. How does God want to speak into people's situations.

So, what is the **core** of the evangelism in your church? Is it trying to get people to give assent to a particular belief system? Or are you trying to introduce people to a person? Are showing them a relationship – better, are you modelling that relationship?

So was Jesus an evangelist? Did he preach the gospel? Did he tell the good news of the kingdom? How did he evangelise? Clearly there was some content to what he taught people (mainly using narrative, of course), but that content wasn't delivered from a pulpit or via a TV or satellite link – no one-way communication for Jesus! In his life, and supremely in the cross, Jesus identified with the suffering of humankind, and did something about it. The two are inseparable in his ministry.

And if Jesus identified with the suffering of humankind, and did all he could to alleviate it – how can we do any less?!

*Lord, preaching as a one-way communication is much easier than incarnating the gospel, but I guess if you did it, we need to get stuck in and get alongside people who are hurting. But thank you that we don't do it alone – we do it together with fellow believers, and you're already in there before we even get near. Please help us listen to you and to other people.*

*Lord, let it be so!*

Paul Bev. 23.3.19

## **57 Restoration, restoration, restoration!**

Continuing my mission to challenge 'what I've always been taught', can I ask what you think of by 'God's justice'? It's difficult **not** to think about God punishing people for their sins, right? The technical term is 'retributive justice'. I'd like us to consider an alternative: restorative justice – mainly because I now think that's what the Bible talks about from end to end!

I was always taught that the solution to the problem of sin goes like this: by faith in Jesus' death, we receive forgiveness and **thereby** we can be allowed to have a relationship with God. But unless we have our sins taken away through the cross there is nothing but estrangement from the holy God, i.e. we face hell.

That's what I've always been taught. But I have come to believe it's an unbiblical view.

What I now believe is that God doesn't just ignore our sin, rather his solution is to come to us and offer us a place in his family; God tries to draw us into relationship with himself (this is in both OT and NT). By this very act of drawing us into relationship, God thereby 'makes us just', or justifies us.

But he can't **force** us into that relationship; we have to come to him in faith and trust. This, I now believe, is the true meaning of 'justification by faith'.

It's through faith in Jesus, through trusting in Jesus, that we come into relationship with God and **thereby**, as a result, we receive forgiveness. Doesn't it make more sense to have faith in a **person**, Jesus, rather than having faith in Jesus' **action** in dying for us?

Does this metaphor help at all? Little Johnny has been playing in the mud in the back yard and he's filthy. What does Mum say to him? 'You're not setting foot in this house until you get cleaned up. Stand underneath the outside tap [Johnny is only five, so the tap is high enough for him!] and get yourself cleaned up, and **then** you can come inside.'

Or does Mum rather put on an old apron, go outside, scoop him up into her arms, take him in and stand him in the sink and wash him down?

Only a metaphor, but it illustrates that the **relationship** comes **first** and **then** through the relationship comes the clean-up – not the other way around.

With that idea in mind, I've reread some of the Bible texts that talk about how Jesus' death brings us back into relationship with God, and they make a lot more sense to me now.

To check this out, why don't we have a look at the classic description of justification by faith – the book of Romans? So are you ready for me, in the second 500 words of this article, to sum up Paul's teaching in Romans? :-)

The key is to realise that Romans was written to people **wanting** God's judgement! They were religious people who wanted God to come in wrath and to punish the godless (Gentile) sinners, the Romans, who were oppressing them. Clearly, God had a choice: he could either punish the sinners (Hurray!) or ignore their sin (Boo!); to just ignore their sin would be grossly unfair!

But could there be a third way? Is it possible that God could restore us? Thankfully, yes, and that's why I'm so excited with the gospel these days:

*...he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Rom 3:26)*

God's justice is not through punishment and violence but through restoration, and Paul's whole argument in Romans is that **not** punishing us is God's means of justice, restorative justice. When we say, 'I **want** not to sin', God says, 'You are free not to sin; draw close to me.' So God makes us righteous (or justifies us) by **relationship**, and that's Romans in a nutshell! God's goodness makes us good; it's **God's** goodness that rubs off on us, by relationship.

Paul's conversion was away from religious-based violence to relationship. As Saul, he thought that sin deserved punishment, and that's what he read his Bible (the Old Testament) to say. But when he was converted, he realised that retribution was **not** God's way – he had read his Bible (OT) totally wrongly and missed its overriding theme of God's **restoration**.

(I know, I know, when you read the OT, all you seem to see is God's punishment, but trust me – and maybe reread some of my earlier articles about wrath – that is **not** the overriding theme of the OT; rather it's about how God is desperately trying to draw people back into relationship.)

On the basis of 'what I've always been taught' I think of Paul's 'justification by faith' as meaning: I've sinned, I deserve punishment, God has provided a let-out clause, so I can avoid God's punishment, and I receive that justification by faith.

I now read 'justification by faith' as God forgiving me through a loving relationship with God-in-Jesus, and that's totally different – totally life-changing! It feels almost 'Damascus road' to me. That's why I walk around with a permanent grin on my face these days!

Post-conversion Paul read the Old Testament totally differently, not as God bringing retribution (in which, as Saul, he tried to lend God a hand), but as God bringing healing and restoration through our relationship.

So Romans is a very carefully argued treatise on how God's restorative justice trumps retributive justice.

Your homework: read Romans 1–3 and see how totally different and more glorious it looks when you see it as based on God's plan to restore humankind. I can now see clearly why they put Romans as the first of the letters; it gives such a clear exposition of God's plan through the whole of history to bring the good news of restoration!

Paul Bev. 24.3.19

*(The above was inspired by chapter 2 of Derek Flood's 'Healing the Gospel'.)*

## **58 Matters arising (I) – Evangelists/evangelism**

I've had responses from a couple of friends about what I said in articles 56 and 57, and I think it might be helpful to discuss the issues raised.

The first friend made the point that I shouldn't 'completely dismiss the role of the evangelist', while admitting that the day of mass meetings might be over, being gradually being replaced by 'friendship evangelism', of which Alpha is the main example.

I'm going to continue my mission to challenge 'what I've always been taught', and I'll assume that we want to base things on what the Bible teaches. So what do we mean by the word 'evangelist' and/or 'evangelism'. Remember that the latter doesn't occur in the Bible at all and, although the former does (three times), there's nothing directly to say what Paul meant by 'do the work of an evangelist' or 'it was he [Christ] who gave some ... to be evangelists'.

Words are slippery things, so let's create two neologisms, 'BGvangelist' (as my friend mentioned Billy Graham) and 'NTvangelist', the latter representing the Bible-word.

And we're going to need to talk about 'preaching the gospel', so again let's create two neologisms for that. First, I've come to believe (and no-one has yet challenged me – please do, if you think I'm leading people astray here) that 'the gospel', as referred to in the Bible – i.e. as preached by Jesus and the early church – was simply the story of Jesus, as the fulfilment of the OT prophecies.

And I think I'm right that, for Billy Graham, to 'preach the gospel' would essentially have meant explaining how Jesus died on the cross, taking the punishment that I deserve for my sins. But I have now come to see this as explaining one of the Bible's several salvation metaphors, often referred to as 'penal substitution'. So I'll distinguish the two as 'NTgospel' and 'PSgospel'.

So what does a BGvangelist do? Traditionally, he (do you know any lady BGvangelists?) explains the PSgospel and asks people to decide to 'give their lives to Christ'. Then they pray a prayer of confession, repentance and acceptance. Then, as my friend rightly points out, 'it was good the way that people were guided into churches straightaway so that they would quickly build relationships with other Christians and have a place to belong.' So after conversion, they are led on to discipleship.

What did an NTvangelist do? Based on my recent reading of the Bible, I have to admit that I don't know! And was 'doing the work of an evangelist' any different from 'preaching the NTgospel'? I don't know! So if any of you can point us to any biblical evidence, I'd really appreciate that, thanks.



Now, as I am wont to do (I can't stop myself, in fact!), let's discuss this issue in terms of relationships. Where is the relationship in BGvangelism – relationship with God, I mean? People are told the message of salvation (penal substitution), asked to make a decision, and then if they say 'yes', they are 'discipled' – they are told that, to develop their new-found friendship, they have to read the Bible, pray and of course 'evangelise'. The last was important, knowing that if they don't evangelise their friends soon, the fire will die, and their opportunity to win some more souls for Christ would dwindle (though there may be many different reasons for that).

This is sounding a bit cynical, sorry; I'm not meaning to totally dismiss a movement that has brought many people to Christ, but I'm trying to question 'what I've always been taught', so let's get back to the relationships. Is it overstating things to say that BGvangelism is a bit like taking someone out on a blind date and asking them at the end of the evening if they would like to get married? The prayer is then a sort of 'I do', and someone says they 'now pronounce you man and wife' and then the local Christians try to help them to learn to live together in love?

There has been some research, I think, about how many of those who made decisions at a Billy Graham campaign are still, some years later, 'happily married' to use my analogy.

What about friendship evangelism? What about Alpha? There's no denying Alpha's success in bringing people to Christ, and it's definitely a step in the right direction – it's certainly relationship-based; initially, of course, it's human-relationship-based. And the Alpha course I've just been involved in was definitely more relationship-based than the first Alpha course I helped to run in 1995 – encouraging! And discipleship is less of a problem – our two Alpha groups on Tuesdays and Thursdays, have turned into follow-up groups, which is brilliant.

My main reservation with Alpha, as with BGvangelism, is that it only uses one of the Bible's salvation metaphors, penal substitution – which is not the most helpful metaphor for some people and some cultures. What's more, in order to help people understand the penal substitution metaphor, we have to use a metaphor: the Nazis want to kill some prisoners, and a Catholic priest offers to let the Nazis kill him instead of a chap who has a wife and children at home – he offers to die in his place 'as Jesus did for us'. Is this **really** a good way to explain God's amazing love for us?! (There was a 90+ year-old Dutch lady on one of our courses and, not surprisingly, she found it very upsetting, having been teenager in Holland at the time.)

Oh dear! I think that the second 'matters arising' will have to wait, as I've run out of time and space, but I hope this has been thought-provoking, and I hope that you don't think I'm being unnecessarily critical; I totally have the heart of an evangelist (whatever one of those is!) and my aim is simply to help us to do evangelism in a more New Testament way.

Well, no, we need to do evangelism in a way that is culturally sensitive, and we need to base it on the **principles** of the New Testament. I just think that penal substitution is **not** a helpful metaphor to use for many people these days, especially when we have to use a metaphor to explain the metaphor!

Discuss. :-)

Paul Bev. 25.3.19

## **59 The most important person in the world**

Question: Who is the most important person in the world to you?

*(Yes, I know, in church, if the question is, 'What's furry, has long ears and hops?', the answer is 'Jesus', but just indulge me – I mean other than Jesus.)*

Question: You're walking down the road; who is the most important person in the world to you?

*(Beware! This is a trick question.)*

Question: Jesus is walking down the road; who is the most important person in the world to him?

See what I mean about a trick question? The most important person to Jesus is the next person he meets. And that person **knows** they're the most important person in the world. They can see it in the way Jesus looks at them. They can see it in the way he listens to them. They can see it in the way he talks to them.

How would it be if throughout today, each of us looked at the person in front of us (or the person we're emailing) and treated them as the most important person in the world?

I could stop there, and I'd have made a really, really important point – but you know me, I just can't stop talking about Jesus...

What if they're a stranger, and you might never meet them again – say someone you meet on a bus or a train. For all you know, they might step off the train/bus and get run over and die. So, 'what I've always been taught' is that, if at all possible, I should share with them the way of salvation. (I was going to ask whether you carry a tract in your pocket or handbag, but that shows just how out-of-date I am – a gospel tract is just a click away on your phone!)

WWJD? Well, what **did** Jesus do? It would be a great Bible study to look at all the occasions where Jesus interacted with a fellow human being and see how he related to them. (I promise you that I don't have an 'answer' here that I'm trying to drive you towards, like herding cattle.)

I'll just share with you one thought that has been very special to me throughout my recent journey. Ignatius said, 'You are a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons'.

If we really believe (and we all say we believe this) that the Christian faith is about having a relationship with The Great Relationship, then it's that relationship, the person of God that we want to share with the next 'the most important person in the world' that we bump into.

I take comfort from the fact that I don't have to do everything: God is easily big enough and clever enough and loving enough to take the one thing that I do for, or say to, that person and combine it with the efforts of other Christians.

Aside: Now that's an interesting thought! Does God use the words and actions of people who are **not** Christians to point people towards knowing his love? Yes, yes, a million times yes! God will do anything and everything possible (that doesn't involve coercion) to draw people into his love. I'll give you two personal examples.

Sue's hairdresser isn't a churchgoer, but when Sue mentioned that she'd started going to the local church, Chrissy said, 'Oh, they're such lovely people there! Several of them come in here, and they're so nice.' And what if Sue had **not** been a Christian and had said to Chrissy that she was **wondering** about going along to St Ed's? I have no doubt whatsoever that Chrissy would have recommended it to her wholeheartedly.

And on a Tuesday morning, we run a cafe in the church; at 10–10.30 we have 'toddler tunes', where the children sing songs and have loads of toys to play with up there in the chancel, girded by the choir pews, the communion rail and the medieval rood screen. They have a great time in the church. The mums, dads, grandparents and carers sit around afterwards having refreshments. At first we got a few fringish churchgoers and some non-churchgoers, and they felt so at home that they invited their totally non-churchgoing friends and contacts!

Where was I? Oh yes, while I take comfort from the fact that God can coordinate the efforts of various Christians (and non-Christians!), it is also a personal challenge. I need to play my part in the team (even if I don't know who the other team members are). So I need to be open (another very special saying for me is 'The most important thing you wear each day is your expression'), I need to be listening – to God and to 'the most important person in the world' if I'm to know how I can play my part. If they express some sorrow or problem, maybe I could off to pray for them – or with them there and then.

I'm excited about what God's going to do **today** through us!

*Father God, you love 'the most important person in the world', so when I bump into that person today, please help me to be your ears, eyes, mouth and hands to help them to be drawn into your loving arms.*

## 60 Bloody hell!

A good friend from St Ed's who, I think, is worried lest I become a universalist, emailed me, saying: (my emphasis) '*Surely God has to **deal with sin with justice**. In other words, if the unrepentant sinner rejects a relationship with Jesus and carries on his lifestyle of sin, what happens when the books are opened on judgement day? "OK son, into heaven you go", or what?*' And when I asked for clarification on 'deal with sin' he added, '*What I mean is to judge between the sheep and the goats, as Jesus put it, wheat and tares.*'

My friend knows that I'm not trying to 'prove him wrong', but I'm going to use his response to illustrate how unhelpful 'what I've always been taught' can be. Let's go backwards through it:

In the wheat and tares parable, Jesus is telling his disciples **NOT** to try to sort out who's in and who's out – leave it to God (and just get on with tending the field, I suppose).

And what does the sheep and goats parable teach? The plain meaning of this scripture is very clear and straightforward: The goats will be told '*Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*' and '*they will go away to eternal punishment*'. (bloody hell!) And the sheep? '*Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*' Well, thank God that we've found Jesus, and we are saved. Phew!

But how does God make the decision as to whether we go to heaven or hell? Jesus' own words make it very, very plain: on judgement day, when the books are opened, the questions will be whether or not we cared for the poor and marginalised. Can you interpret Matthew 25:31-46 in any other way?!

But that can't be right, can it?! *We've always been taught* that whether we go to heaven or hell depends on whether we have a personal relationship with Jesus, and here's Jesus saying that it's whether we have cared for the poor!

Who is right? *What I've always been taught* or what Jesus teaches?! Are you willing to argue with Jesus' own words?!

Oh, I'm sure you'll argue from other scriptures about personal salvation being the crux of the heaven/hell decision – after all, we've rehearsed that story over and over and over again:

If you do things wrong, you'll go to hell. The good news is you don't have to go to hell. God has provided a way you can escape your deserved fate. Jesus has died in your place, and if you believe in him, you'll get to heaven.

Isn't that the 'gospel' that you received, when you became a Christian? You received personal salvation. Hallelujah! After that, you were encouraged to be a disciple: (1) read your Bible, (2) pray, (3) evangelise and (4) care for the poor too. (But we don't like to over-stress the last bit because we don't want people to think you get to heaven by doing good works!)

OK, I'm being deliberately provocative – but I know Someone else who was deliberately provocative! But can you see how **superficial** personal salvation is? How does that 'gospel' have any relevance to me if I'm suffering severe mental illness? or if I was abused as a child? or if I'm in grinding poverty because of the 'system', the moneyed meritocrats who keep me in poverty to feed their desire for more and more money?

If you think the cross is just the place where Jesus won your personal salvation, then don't you **dare** say yours is a Bible-based church or, worse still, a 'cross-centred church'!

If we treat sin as ‘doing things wrong’, then we’re only treating the **symptoms** and not the **root cause**; we’re ignoring the fact that sin is a fatal disease – a deadly cancer. The Bible does **not** teach that sin is doing naughty things; the Bible teaches that sin is broken relationships – with God primarily, but then with each other. **That** is the problem that needs solving, **not** ‘sins’ (the things we do wrong).

The root problem is selfishness: that we focus on ourselves (as Adam and Eve did) instead of focusing on our relationship with God, and then it all goes horribly wrong. So we can see it as:

sin (root cause) = broken relationships

## ***sins (plural) = the result of broken relationships (= hell?)***

This is why I keep jumping up and down and getting cross when people diminish the cross by treating it as if it were just a means of personal salvation – as a way to avoid ‘going to hell’.

Even worse than that, if we’re a ‘cross-centred church’, and we keep telling people ‘the gospel’ of personal salvation, then what outsiders will hear is:

You are a sinner; you keep doing things wrong, so you deserve to go to hell. But if you believe in Jesus, you’ll be able to get to heaven. And as people who study the Bible, we’ll tell you exactly which things are sinful and which not: [insert your own church’s list of the worst sins].

Compare that with (just an idea, not a pat formula):

Welcome, God loves you! Life can be hell at times, but God loves you and you’re welcome here among us – and many of us are suffering hell in our lives too. But the important thing is that we love you as you are. In our services we celebrate a man (God on earth, actually) who went through hell (through the worst that man could possibly do to anyone) and died, but he triumphed through that hell and came back to life. That same power that raised Jesus from the grave is available to **you**, to us, here and now, and it can transform your life! We don’t have any simple pat answers to your suffering, but we’re committed to bringing heaven into the hell you see around you. That’s God’s stock-in-trade!

I thought that my crusade was against penal substitution; it’s not. As I’ve gone through this journey I’ve come to realise that my crusade is against reducing the gospel to personal salvation; this has diminished the power and meaning and significance of the cross; also, its focus on sin-as-transgression, has convinced outsiders that all we’re concerned about is telling other people how to behave (and condemning them when they live differently). And we’re surprised that our churches are dwindling?! Well, OK, not all churches **are** dwindling. There are ‘successful’ churches, ones that attract large numbers of people, but if you’re a member of one such church, look around you and do a tally of the number of ‘successful’ people and the number of people whose lives are a ‘failure’ (in man’s eyes, in their eyes).

The scripture that came to mind just now was ‘we preach Christ, and him crucified’, which seemed to sum up the point I’ve come to: the gospel **IS** Christ, the narrative of his life, death and resurrection, and the cross is Christ’s universal throne, where he overcame all the forces of evil. Hallelujah!

*Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength. (1 Cor 1:20-25)*

## 61 Yet more glorious!

The further I go on this journey of exploration, the more excited I get about the way God works in this world, and I'm finding that the same principle works in situation after situation (and I'm not talking about so-called 'right' and 'wrong'). I shouldn't be surprised, of course, because God, as Creator, knows how things actually **work**. I'm writing now because yet another penny has just dropped for me, which applies this principle more and more widely.

I've been trying, as my Lent exercise, to read something spiritual every day, and yesterday I tried (for the third time!) to read a book that someone had recommended, but it was so booring! In desperation, I decided to look on the internet, and because Derek Flood's 'Healing the Gospel' has provided me with so much helpful material lately, I googled his name and found a 20 min video talk he did in 2014.

While I wouldn't altogether recommend the video (I thought he was too negative about penal substitution), it did shake me enough to enable another penny to drop into place. He was talking about applying Jesus' principle of **enemy love**, and was showing how it could be applied within the penal justice system. I was looking for something a bit more obviously 'spiritual', but I thought I'd listen anyway, and I'm really glad I did!

I'll start with the particular, and then try to show how, I believe, it applies universally.

The criminal justice system is predicated mainly on the idea of punishment (hence the term '**penal** justice'): to survive in prison, men have to face violence, so they learn to 'stand up for themselves' and thus become 'better' criminals as a result. However, Flood quoted the results of a 'restorative justice' programme that had been set up to enable serious offenders to cope with their negative emotions by providing them with alternative strategies for overcoming those feelings, thus enabling them to relate better to people around them. This has resulted in a **massive** reduction in reoffending.

So why has restorative justice not been taken up more widely? Well, it's much 'easier' just to decide what's right and wrong and then 'apply' it by force; that can be physical, emotional or societal force. But this does not just apply to the penal justice system but also to society in general, and even to international politics. We decide what's right and wrong and then ensure that people/countries 'do what's right' by sanctions, militarism, laws upon laws upon rules upon guidelines. But that way of organising society has many, many problems, most notably 'who decides what's right?' And we all know how fraught that can be.

One big problem is that politicians love to decide what's 'right' but then, by definition, what the other side says is **wrong**, so this leads to greater and greater polarisation, with each side demonising the other. The effect is that if the opposition comes up with a half-way workable solution, those in power almost **have** to reject it 'on principle', because admitting that their opponents have had a good idea is a definite no-no.

Anyway, to get back to being positive, it's this same principle of restorative justice (enemy love) that I've been discovering on a spiritual basis through my journey. While the penal substitution theory of Jesus' cross is predicated on the model of crime and punishment, I've come to believe that what really matters to God is not 'right and wrong' (sins), but restoring relationships – relationships with God and with one another: 'Love the Lord your God ... and love your neighbour ...' as someone once said!

And what I've been realising is that restorative justice is also the principle behind what several erudite people such as Eisenstein and Jordan Peterson have realised: it's not about what's right and what's wrong, per se, rather it's about how we can get a workable solution and a practical solution that minimises damage, e.g. Eisenstein's 'abundance and gift' to replace 'accumulation and scarcity'. There are enough resources in the world if we could just learn to share, rather than insisting on our 'rights'.

The massive irony and great sadness to me is that while Jesus taught his followers about the principle of restorative justice some 2000 years ago (echoing what God had told the Israelites even longer ago), more recently, Christians

have come up with a 'better' solution: personal salvation. *We are taught that* the really important thing is that is each of us, as individuals, have to 'get saved' and then we can get stuck in to society and sort out the mess.

And how should we sort out the mess? *We are taught that*, as Christians, we know what's 'right', because the Bible tells us what's right! So we see being 'salt and light' as going around telling other people what's right (and maybe even **making** them do what's right).

How could we have perverted Jesus' teaching to such a massive extent?! Do you see what we've done? We've allowed our faith to follow the same pattern of working out right and wrong and then enforcing right by punishing wrong.

So we've modelled our faith on the principle of crime and punishment: God tells us what's right; we transgress the laws; so we deserve to be punished by God; but we can escape punishment if we know the key, which is to believe in Jesus' death as a means to get a free pardon.

No, sorry, that's **not** God's principle; God wants to **restore** relationships, to heal us. What Jesus came to model was **enemy love**, and although that principle – restorative justice – is not easy, it actually **works**, as the non-violent protests of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, among others, have shown – their enemy love exposed the evils within the system that sought to dominate them.

We haven't got time or space (or in my case the expertise), but we could apply restorative justice to Brexit, to Northern Ireland, to the Middle East, to global warming, to sustainability, to ... you name it.

I believe that God's plan was that Christians should **demonstrate** enemy love, restorative justice, but we replaced kingdom, covenant, community and relationship with personal salvation. God forgive us and please help us to get back to being the kind of salt and light that Jesus intended.

*Lord, let it be!*

Paul Bev. 1.4.19

## ***62 Let's get real***

Do you remember my friend Martha (not her real name)? I introduced her to you in my very first article, way back in August. She had been told by her church leaders that she had to 'share the gospel' with various people. Martha has three grown-up children, Agatha, Bertie and Cedric. Agatha is still following the faith but Bertie and Cedric – despite what they were always taught – are not. But they are all really lovely people.

I'd also like to introduce you to sixteen lovely ladies I know, who all love the Lord, but their spouses don't. (Of those, 13 go to St Ed's, which only has a congregation of 100–150!). Their spouses are, I believe, all lovely people – some I know well, some I've not yet met.

And if I add two (relatively) young men who are very dear to me, that makes a total of 20 lovely men who don't follow the faith. So, from my 70,000+ words of theological spouting are there any crumbs of comfort for those of us who love these 20 men? Absolutely! Massively! Wonderfully! Gloriously! But let me start from *what I've always been taught*, and then tell you what I now believe to be the more glorious truth.

*I've always been taught* that unless and until these men acknowledge that they are sinners (despite most of them being really, **really** lovely people), when they die, they are going to hell – eternal separation from God. So how does that make you feel? Fearful? OK, so what are we going to do about it?!

*I've always been taught* that I have to tell them that they are sinners: 'All your righteous acts are like filthy rags' (Is 64:6), and 'The wages of sin is death' (Rom 6:26) – that sort of thing. If I **don't** tell them, then I will have failed in my responsibility, and their eternal blood will be on my hands.

OK, I'm hamming it up a bit, but isn't that in essence what we've all been taught?

So let's try again, using this new, more glorious gospel that I've (re)discovered – the gospel of restoration.

Imagine Jesus standing in front of your Cedric, or whoever. No, go on, imagine it. Do it now! But imagine Jesus wearing ordinary everyday clothes, so that Cedric isn't distracted by memories of pictures in dusty Bibles.

OK, what did you see in your mind's eye? You saw Jesus looking into Cedric's eyes, and smiling, perhaps? And how did the conversation go? And what did Cedric see in this stranger? How did he react to this man?

I think Cedric would have quickly spotted that this man was interested in him as a person; I think he'd soon have seen what a gracious, loving, open person he was, and I think he'd have related well to him. They'd have chatted about all sorts of things – initially the weather of course (casting Jesus as an Englishman!), but moving on to other things. Jesus would probably have asked about Cedric's family, his friends, his interests. He'd have gradually built up a relationship with him.

If you're into this sort of imagination thing, dwell on this, sit with it, pray into it, be part of it and see what God has to say to you about your relationship with Cedric (or whoever).

But if, like me, you don't really 'do imagination', simply skip to the next page...



*In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have **confidence** on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is **no fear in love**. But **perfect love drives out fear**, because **fear has to do with punishment**. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. (1 Jn 4:17-19)*

For years, I've 'known' that there was no way that my own 'Cedric' would ever come (back) to faith. He and his wife are adamant that any faith that says, 'We're right and everyone else is wrong' is a non-starter – and who can blame them, frankly! (I'll give you my understanding of the verse they quoted, 'No-one comes to the Father except through me,' on another occasion. I don't think it is quite so totally misquoted as 'the wages of sin', but misquoted it is, in my view.)

That fear has now gone; I no longer fear for Cedric's immortal soul. God's perfect love has cast out that fear, because fear has to do with punishment, and God has nothing to do with punishment – never has had and never will have. God **IS LOVE**, and therefore he is only interested in restoration, not punishment. But he won't (can't) force us to accept his love, so hell is the result of our rejecting God's love; in my view, hell is not and never was a form of punishment.

If you disagree and think I'm going 'soft on hell', and that I've quoted my two verses above out of context, please check out the whole chapter and you'll see that they are but the pinnacle of a mountain of love.

So, please have confidence (faith) in our miracle-working God; look into your Cedric's eyes and tell him how much you love him and appreciate him. There's absolutely no need to fear. Here are some scriptures to reassure you:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God **did not send his Son into the world to condemn** the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe **stands condemned** already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (Jn 3:16-18) (The one who stands condemned hasn't **been** condemned by God; he is **self**-condemned.)*

*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting **anyone** to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Pet 3:9)*

*This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants **all men** to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. (1 Tim 2:3,4)*

So we know from this what God wants, what God's will is: he wants my Cedric and all 19 others to be saved. We can therefore – with confidence (faith) – love, work and pray to see 'thy will be done'. You could say: relax, chill and do God's will. (Or, to quote Julian of Norwich, 'All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.)

*They kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Lord, let it be!*

Paul Bev. 3.4.19

## **63 More matters arising**

A friend has sent me a round-up of some queries he's come up with in reading my recent articles. I really appreciate this because I certainly don't have all the answers, and so dialogue is much more helpful than a monologue. Actually, I'm not even sure I'm looking for 'answers' – I'm trying to grow and develop my relationship with God, so any help I can get is much appreciated.

In article 54, I said '*I thought that my crusade was against penal substitution; it's not. As I've gone through this journey I've come to realise that my crusade is against reducing the gospel to personal salvation*' and my friend said he was unhappy about the idea of a crusade, saying that it smacked of an 'I'm right' attitude which is something I was supposed to have rejected in myself.

Fair comment, sorry. Let me try to say it more carefully. I still feel that, for most of the people that I want to witness to today, the penal substitution metaphor is a major turn-off, and so I simply won't use it in talking to people about what Jesus has done for us on the cross. Indeed, at one stage of my journey, I actually thought it was a mistaken interpretation of scripture; I'm not sure now, but certainly, I find it unhelpful. Anything that turns people away from God and Jesus is a no-no for me, sorry.

But in article 54, I was trying to challenge people on the way we reduce 'salvation' to little more than 'whether I get to heaven or not' (and whether my loved one will get to heaven or not). Surely, God wants to restore the whole world – 'God so loved **the world**' – but we've reduced the scope of God's love to just concentrating on ourselves. Rather, God sees the bigger picture and wants to bring healing more widely, and not just to a few individuals.

So I'd sum up the errors I used to make as:

1) having an overly 'mechanistic' approach to the faith = penal substitution. We like it because it's cut and dried and we know who's in and who's out, who's really a Christian and who's not. And it's really easy to put it into a neat 'gospel presentation'.

2) having an over-insistence on a me-me approach to the faith = personal salvation. This appeals to the individualist attitudes of today's society, which is all about my rights, my satisfaction, my image, my choices. But as we know, that doesn't make people happy. Thankfully though, people are beginning to see the value in community, whether it's choirs, or community farms/gardens, or sports/exercise groups or even churches(!). (We've even had the local council saying to us at St Ed's, in effect, 'We see you're doing community-type stuff, so would you be able to do more if we gave you some money?!')

And this brings me to my friend's next question:

*'You seem to be downplaying 'individual' (personal) salvation and moving towards 'collective' salvation – please clarify.'*

I'm certainly not trying to replace personal salvation with collective salvation. Rather I'm saying that our **over-emphasis** on personal salvation can diminish the power of the cross, which did much, much more than just bringing us personal salvation. For example, the problems of the world are not, in my view, just down to personal sin; there's such a thing as institutional evil, and on the cross Jesus defeated **all** the powers and dominations, anything and everything that causes hurt to humans. Let's get a bigger and bigger view of the cross (article 54).

*'Sheep and goats – please clarify. Are you suggesting a works-based salvation through maybe social action?'*

Nope! Individual salvation (amongst other things) comes through the cross of Christ. However, I was really amused when I re-read Jesus' teaching in Matt 25:31-46, where he clearly says that the sheep and the goats are going to be judged on the basis of whether or not we have cared for the poor and marginalised. That sounds rather like salvation by works, doesn't it? But that's Jesus' idea, not mine!

It seems to me that the onus is on those who **don't** believe in a works-based salvation to find a way to interpret Jesus' words in Matt 25. (And since I don't believe in a works-based salvation, I need to look into this a bit more.)

The problem, it seems to me, is that we are too focused on finding out exactly how salvation **works**, what's the formula?! But Jesus' teaching doesn't allow that; indeed, some of his teaching is frankly contradictory – well, it is if you insist on too literal an interpretation.

I don't think it was ever God's intention that we should know **exactly** how it all works; I think we have to have enough faith to look at the scriptures and be more willing to see things as metaphors that convey important truths. Yes, I know it's nicer to know exactly what's what, but I think we need to look at Jesus' teaching – indeed, the whole of scripture – on the basis of faithful questioning, constantly discussing with one another what the scriptures might mean, rather than trying to nail it down.

Let me say that last paragraph in a different way: *I don't think it was ever God's intention that we should know exactly how it all works...* because faith is a relationship with God, and you can't actually define any relationship; you can get to know the person, and 'how they tick', but the fluidity of relationships defies definition.

Any other 'matters arising' would be most welcome.

Paul Bev. 4.4.19

## 64 Communicating the gospel

In my very first article in August I wrote: *'So does God actually want people to come to know his love? Of course he does! Then you and I need to do some serious thinking about how we communicate that love in the 21st century.'* At the time, I was asking how we could communicate sin-and-a-holy-God – the bad news – so that people could appreciate what Christ has done for them by dying on the cross – the good news.

What a long journey I've been on! To communicate God's love, I first needed a **very** different view of what 'the gospel' actually is. So let's try again to ask how we can communicate God's love...

I have deliberately not titled this article 'Preaching the gospel', even though the Bible talks repeatedly about 'preaching the good news' and 'preaching the good news of the kingdom' or just 'preaching the kingdom' (there's a rough list at the end of the article). Maybe I'm being unbiblical, but I prefer 'communicating', because the modern connotations of 'preaching' are **telling** people that they are wrong, sinful, and going to hell, **telling** them what's right and what's wrong. So if we 'preach' in that sense it just puts people off. How many of my 'twenty men' don't go to church now because they don't want to be preached at?! Most, I would guess.

So, if we think that the gospel really is good news – the best news EVER – then we have to put ourselves in the place of 'les vingt' and ask how they see us, how they see Jesus. What is going to attract them to this man that we find so irresistible.

But actually is it worth stopping right there, and checking ourselves? Do we **really** find Jesus irresistible? Or do we just believe that: yes, the Christian faith is true. Two years ago, I said to people that I had 'regained my faith'; I could recite the creed without any qualms, but my faith was just a set of beliefs. Now I feel as if I'm on fire! I just want to know how I can best communicate the gospel/the good news/the kingdom to the people around me. Please God!

When I woke this morning, I thought of my spiritual director's comment yesterday, that in view of my strong feelings about what 'the gospel' really is (the story of Jesus, not just a 'way to get saved'), it might be a good idea to look at Matthew 5–7, especially the beatitudes. As I lay there, I thought about the first one: *Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* Now 'poor in spirit' is hardly a description I'd have given my former self. I **knew** what was what, I knew the gospel and I could prove it to anyone who was willing to talk to me about it. I had spent years persuading people, and I had persuaded a number of people come to faith.

But then the reason I ended up in that sect was that its leader had a powerful healing and prophetic ministry, which I thought was a good way to **prove** to people that God is real and active today, doing miracles. And I felt that my church was short-changing the gospel by neglecting modern miracles.

Where was I? Oh yes, in bed, thinking about 'theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. Sounds weird, doesn't it? It sounds as if Jesus is saying that such people 'own' the kingdom – it's 'theirs'. The next phrase that came to mind as I dozed was 'the kingdom of God **BELONGS** to such as these' – so somebody really **does** own the kingdom; where does that come from? I couldn't remember, so I rushed downstairs to find out. Are you ahead of me? It's the little children! Luvvit!

But what **IS** this 'kingdom'?! When did you last hear someone 'preaching the kingdom'? So if I've discovered that the **gospel** is so much bigger and more glorious than being just being a mechanism for salvation, and if the **cross** is so much bigger and more glorious than I ever thought, then maybe the kingdom is something much more wonderful too. I can't wait to do some more Bible study. Indeed, the list below was a starter for me – interesting that 'preach the gospel' and 'preach the kingdom' seem to be synonymous.

Sorry, this article is distraction upon distraction! Where was I? Yes, how can we communicate the good news to *les vingt*? At an Alpha follow-up meeting, 'Ariadne', the wife of one of these men, said that a lifelong friend of her husband (Cedric) was very brutally murdered six years ago, here in Norwich, and that it was a mutual friend of Cedric's who discovered the remains of the body, and that poor chap has since died of stress. So how can Cedric **ever** believe in God?! That's a genuine question! This a real person, dearly loved by God and for whom Christ gave his life. How are we to communicate to Cedric? I want to know, NOW!

But I am encouraged to a degree. In one of the later Alpha sessions, I asked the group if they felt that anything had changed during the course, and Ariadne (who is even older than me, I think) said that she felt she had become more patient as a result, especially with her husband who was 'a little difficult at times' and isn't in the best of health (she didn't say anything, at that time, about the death of Cedric's friend).

As Ariadne and others get more and more quietly excited about Jesus, and as their lives change for the better, as they increase in the fruits of the spirit, as they pray for their Cedrics, as they listen to them, as they care for them, do you not think they'll be **communicating the gospel** and doing so very powerfully?

Seriously, just suppose that we all really were full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, wouldn't the effect be dramatic?!

I shared this idea with the wife of another of *les vingt*. She shook her head despondently: 'Yes, but I'm **not** full of the fruit of the Spirit'. She has a really lovely husband who is very supportive of what she does 'for the church', and she feels that **he** is more full of that fruit than **she** is! It would be a miracle if we really were full of love, joy, peace...

But hang on! How big is your God?! Does God really do miracles today?! Doesn't God **want** Cedric to come to faith? (thy will be done) Let's pray for miracles in each other's lives. Pray that God's Spirit will be poured into our hearts and that we'll be full to overflowing with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Join the quiet revolution of God's love in and through us. Thy will be done!

Lord, let it be!

Paul Bev. 5.4.19

preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!  
preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,  
preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill.  
preach Christ out of selfish ambition  
preach good news to the poor.  
preach him among the Gentiles  
preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.  
preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.  
preach the good news of the kingdom of God  
preach the good news to all creation.  
preach the good news.  
preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome.  
preach the gospel in the regions beyond you.  
preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me,  
preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.  
preach the gospel to them.  
preach the gospel where Christ was not known  
preach the gospel – not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.  
preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!  
preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.  
Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season  
preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.'  
preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,  
preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.  
preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."  
preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.  
preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel.  
preached that Christ has been raised from the dead,  
preached that people should repent.  
preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.  
preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples.  
preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ  
preached the good news to them.  
preached the gospel of God to you.  
preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.  
preached the gospel to you.  
preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.  
preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.  
preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing."  
preached the word of the Lord.  
preached the word to them.  
preached the word wherever they went.  
preacher of righteousness, and seven others;  
preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached,  
preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.  
preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.  
preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offence of the cross has been abolished.  
preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.  
preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.  
preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.  
preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.  
preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere.  
preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge  
preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.  
preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.  
preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge?  
preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you

preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews.  
preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders, came up to him.  
preaching the kingdom will ever see me again.  
preaching the word in the province of Asia.  
preaching the word of God at Berea  
preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!  
preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power,  
preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.

## 65 More feedback

It seems I'm totally obsessed by all this writing; it has **felt** as if I've been driven (by God), but how do I know? Anyway, I'm now working on the basis that if any one of my articles could help any one of you, then God is perfectly capable of prompting that person to read that article, while ignoring the rest.

In the past few days, with a job coming (now arrived!) I thought I would do less because the job has to be finished before Sue and I fly off to Tenerife on 25th for part of her recuperation. But suddenly I'm getting more feedback from readers, so here I am again.

### ***Dogmatism***

At my Friday lunchtime prayer meeting (five friends from five churches) I got really heated (as I do these days!), and the word 'dogmatic' was used, in love, warning me of the danger. I emailed them later to the effect:

I'm really sorry that I came over as being dogmatic at lunchtime.

*OED says: dogmatic = Inclined to lay down principles as undeniably true.*

I definitely don't think I know the right principles; indeed, that's where I'm saying Christians have gone wrong (I've gone wrong!) for so many years. It's not about right and wrong, but rather about individually and together trying to deepen our relationship with God through Jesus, aided by the Holy Spirit. We're all on a journey.

I'm passionate, yes, but I'm trying desperately not to be dogmatic.

### ***My sect***

One feedback was from my cousin, who asked about the sect I have talked about. Now aged 70+, he came to faith at age 48, knowing absolutely nothing about the Bible beforehand. (I must talk to him about *les vingt* [see article 64], to see if he can advise.)

'Harry' was someone I knew from my work with Acorn computers; I invited him on an Alpha course in the mid 1990s; he started attending our church. Unknown to me, he had spiritual gifts he'd had since a child. A few years on, he started a Bible study, which I attended. He had strong prophetic and healing gifts which I experienced first-hand; they were very real. But I foolishly thought that the gifting validated his teaching; and, over the years, that teaching drifted and drifted, such that I didn't notice (a.k.a. the frog in hot water syndrome).

Sue knew it was wrong, but graciously (and sensibly) didn't try to tell me I was wrong; instead, she developed her own spirituality in a more contemplative direction (which I have now followed – another factor in my deepening relationship with God).

Thankfully, in 2011, I suddenly realised that I had become totally obsessed by being right – but that the effect of this 'right' belief was a totally wrong attitude to other people. They had become, in my mind, enemies of the true way, who were trying to draw me away from the true path to salvation – and I lived in fear of losing that salvation. Quelle idiot!

But God graciously used that time to teach me about a number of things. One was the importance of the Gospels, especially the sermon on the mount, especially the beatitudes [see 64!], which Harry said should be seen as the 'be-attitudes', not the 'do-attitudes'. And the other obvious thing was that being right is **not** what counts, though I only

learnt that in retrospect. When I escaped the group – leapt out of the boiling water – I was left with, ‘Well, what **do** I believe? Does God exist, even? Is the whole of the Christian faith just made-up wishful thinking?’

Over the following five years, I got back my **beliefs**, but it still wasn’t a **relationship**. Thanks to Sue, I discovered silence as a wonderful way to develop my relationship with God, but it wasn’t until I discovered the Trinity – that God **IS** relationship – that things really took off.

### ***Chosen or called?***

In yesterday’s prayer meeting, as we discussed what to pray about, we mentioned the elder sister of one of the group (who herself is even older than me), who has been strongly resistant to her sister’s Christian urgings. I’m not sure if it was in relation to that, but later another member of the group started saying that ‘not everyone is called’, but as he was speaking I just sat shaking my head. No, no, no! I can’t accept that, sorry.

I haven’t had time to look up the scriptures (I’ve got a book to edit!), but are we really saying that the father of the prodigal son is the same God who actively **decides** that someone is not going to be saved. [That’s probably the point at which I went into dogmatic mode!] I’ve already rehearsed what I have come to believe, that God wants everyone to be saved. That this is God’s **will**. But God’s will is **not** always done. God voluntarily limits his power, out of love for us. He has chosen not to **force** us to follow his way – it wouldn’t be love if he did. So, in that sense God is **not** all-powerful.

In any case, if God is **totally** all-powerful but God doesn’t **do** anything when the innocent suffer, he’s a heartless monster, surely?! No, it’s because, out of love, God limits his power and...

...sorry, I have to stop. This is a huge issue, but an important one if we’re to reach *les vingt* and our F&F [see 50]. The thing is that many of them say (perfectly reasonably) ‘How can a God of love allow suffering?!’ And this is another factor that prevents them from coming to faith.

For their sakes, we need to face these issues; we have a responsibility to them, don’t we?!

Can I encourage you to read Flood’s ‘Healing the Gospel’ if you want to take this seriously – I have a spare copy – and on the suffering thing, Jersak’s ‘A More Christ-like God’.

*Father, I desperately want to reach those who don’t yet know you!*

Lord, may thy will be done!

Paul Bev. 6.4.19

## ***66 What is God really like?***

What has so transformed my life this past two years? What has prompted this verbal outpouring?! I feel as if I’ve finally discovered what God is really like: God is love and, like a child, I have received that love and have been overwhelmed by it. (1 John 3 and John 14–17)

That’s why I became a Christian in the first place – coming from a dysfunctional family, I saw love in action in the late 1960s in a Christian community in Yorkshire and was drawn to Jesus as to a magnet – but that love-based faith was soon overtaken by a ‘knowing what is right’ faith.

God showed me his love again in the late 1980s through a Colin Urquhart course, ‘How to love and be loved’, which bowled me over – but, over time, I lost sight of it. Then I discovered it again to some extent each time I read Yancey’s ‘What’s so amazing about grace’; I must have read it four times, at a guess. I knew that book was important, though I didn’t know quite why.

I lost it big-time when I got involved in a small sect, where love came to be replaced by total fear of not getting into heaven. I pulled out and tried to rebuild my faith, but I was still far from happy because all that I could find was the faith that most of us were brought up in: God is holy, I am sinful, sin separates, Jesus is the answer. It may be 'right' but it's hardly magnetic, is it?!

Then two years ago I 'discovered' love-as-Trinity, and in this seven-month writing journey, I have grabbed hold of God's love again, and I will not let it go – nay, Love will not let me go!

I now see the Bible, I now see God, totally in terms of love. I interpret every Bible passage in the light of the loving Father portrayed by Jesus, so if a passage seems to show God as condemning us or as choosing whether someone will go to hell or not I reject it – well, I reject **my understanding** of those verses. Usually, the problem is that I am interpreting it too literally, or I'm not taking account of the cultural setting of the writer and of the writer's immediate audience (very much a heaven-and-hell culture), or because I'm not allowing for Jesus' use of hyperbola – over-stating something for dramatic effect.

That's how I 'knew', the other day, that my friend was wrong to say that maybe God had not chosen that person. In my view, that would be totally out of character: the loving Father I have come to know would not **choose** to reject anyone. No way!

I have repeatedly called this 'faithful questioning': I have faith in God, and I believe that the scriptures are inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16,17), but I then have to discuss the more difficult scriptures with God and with you, my friends. This isn't an easy process, but we need to do it, for the sake of *les vingt* and our F&F. And anyway, God won't reject us if we get it wrong.

(If you want a **real** challenge, check out the scripture that's the origin of that quote about being chosen. I was shocked when I found it – it's actually Jesus speaking, not Paul as I had suspected. And I haven't yet worked out how to apply my glib principle above to that passage.)

Jesus was born into a religious system that was based on who's in and who's out, who's going to heaven and who's going to hell – and he fought and taught against that system. In his day, many people accepted the system, but many felt totally excluded – and it was they who were drawn by Jesus' love.

Thankfully, those like *les vingt* who have rejected Christianity, are probably rejecting the religious system that I too have rejected, and it's similar to the one that Jesus fought against. We can therefore have confidence that God knows how to draw them; ours is to show them God's love in its fullness, and then they will see through the false religion and be attracted to God's love in us!

I can confidently assert that **this is God's will for your loved ones**, and I'll pray with you that 'Thy will be done on earth'.

But in order for this to happen, those of us brought up in traditional Christian circles, will need to radically repent, to have a complete change of mind. We will need to stop thinking of God as a righteous judge trying to decide who is in and who is out. Instead, we must allow Jesus' teaching and example to take priority in our interpretations of the Scriptures, as we view God as a loving Father, longing for us and our loved ones (and our enemies, for that matter!) to come home.

Lord, let it be so!

Paul Bev. 8.4.19

If you want a sound theological basis for the views I'm expressing, please read 'A more Christ-like God, A more beautiful gospel' by Bradley Jersak.



## 67 *The insidiousness of sin*

My spiritual director suggested that, given my recent focus on love and not sin-and-a-holy-God, I might benefit from reading Matthew 5–7 again, especially the beatitudes. He was right, very right! I'm reading the whole thing so differently now, and it's coming up in glorious Technicolor.

Be careful, Paul, when you're running around smiling at everyone all the time! Sin is insidious, so take care lest you fall. How right! And I've fallen, big time! (Confession time.)

So let's wind back and see where I went wrong. I had been soaking up the 'be-attitudes', and thinking how it was all about our attitudes and the positive ways we can relate to other people, and how we can bring good and positiveness into their lives. Great stuff!

After a few days, I moved on to verses 13–16, salt and light, and found that I was reading that passage differently too. We all know that in Jesus' day salt was used as a preservative, and that salt is also used to make things taste nice. So I revelled in the idea that someone in love with Jesus can make other people's lives taste nicer (especially those people whose lives are crap). We can spread that love and joy to anyone and everyone we meet day by day, and we can offer encouragement and hope – even just a smile can make someone's day more enjoyable, or just a few positive comments to a person ringing you from a call centre. Why not?! Be nice to them: **you wish them**, 'Have a great day!' I've already said how God can coordinate each of our inputs to any given person's life to help draw them closer and closer into God's love.

And be light – that can be the same. Shed light wherever you go throughout the day, notice something positive and comment on it. I don't need to go on about this; you can see how much of a difference your salt and light could make to other people on a day-to-day basis. People desperately **need** encouragement, and if we can't give it, who can?!

Once again, I was reading scripture from a totally different, positive viewpoint, and it was good, very good. But where did I go wrong? Where is the **insidiousness of sin**?

I then decided to look and see what other Christian commentators made of 'salt and light'. On the first website that Google offered, I found someone being very positive and talking about the massive contribution of a Spirit-filled life. It contained a beautiful passage about the positive effect of a 'salty' Christian bringing peace to troubled situations, binding up wounds and exemplifying the love of God in Christ, by returning good for evil. Great stuff!

But I read on (my underlining)...

Believers in Christ are preservatives to the world, preserving it from the evil inherent in the society of ungodly men whose unredeemed natures are corrupted by sin.

...

The passage clearly states that the difference between the Christian and the world **must be preserved**; therefore, any choice on our part that blurs the distinction between us and the rest of the world is a step in the wrong direction. This can happen either through a choice to accept the ways of the world for the sake of comfort or convenience or to **contravene the law** of obedience to Christ.

...

It is when we depart from the Spirit-led lifestyle of genuine discipleship that the distinctions between ourselves and the rest of the world become blurred and our testimony is hindered.

Do you see now what I mean by the insidiousness of sin? ...the insidiousness of our constant **concentration on sin**? The overriding sense was that, as Christians, we have to be very careful how we live, making sure that we 'take up our cross' and don't 'contravene the law of ... Christ'. Only then will our testimony will be successful.

It sounds good and worthy, but it's probably the attitude that our unsaved friends and family have reacted against: Christians see other people are 'evil', 'unredeemed' and 'corrupted by sin'. We can say as often as we like that 'we too are sinners', but they won't hear it. To them, a sinner is a wife beater, a thief, a whatever – and they're just

ordinary people, not perfect, but generally doing good to others; indeed, many of them have more time to go about doing good than we do because they're not spending so many hours a week running a church!!

Yes, sin as self-focus is a dangerous, insidious killer and, yes, Jesus died to rescue us, but if we major in our 'evangelism' on sin-and-a-holy-God, those we love are going to be pushed further and further away from the wonderful, beautiful, loving, forgiving, welcoming, healing God-who-is-like-Jesus!

*A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so also you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34,35)*

Lord, let it be so!

Paul Bev. 11.4.19

Do please read 'A more Christ-like God, A more beautiful gospel' by Bradley Jersak. It's a bit theological, but I found it transformational.

## 68 Spiritual warfare works

When an editor from the USA contacted me recently about my book of computer programs, he said he was a Christian; he encouraged me about the testimony that I had put in an appendix, and so we fell to chatting about the faith. After I told him about my concern for *les vingt*,<sup>[64]</sup> I started thinking about people becoming Christians, and I realised that the last time I had helped anyone to come to faith was probably 20–25 years ago – half my Christian life!

'Chuck' comforted me by reminding me that '*the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers*' (2 Cor 4:4), and how, in his words, 'people would rather choose to be slaves to their own sinful pleasures, if this means they do not have to submit to God'. [Read that again, and catch the tone – but I'm not saying this critically of Chuck – but what do we mean by 'submit to God'?!]

But this morning he candidly admitted that when 900 churches in his area recently put on a seven-week evangelistic event, his church of around 3000 people had less than 20 people come to faith.

I'm not going to beat myself up about my lack of 'winning souls for Christ', but it would be sobering if each of the 30+ churches represented by my readers were as honest as Chuck. It doesn't compare well with the progress of the early church, does it? Maybe it's time we did some spiritual warfare?!

I got drawn into that sect because I saw spiritual gifts being exercised and I thought that if my church took that part of the NT teaching more seriously, then more people would come to faith. We need some spiritual warfare, because seeing miracles will convince people of the truth of the gospel. My motive was good – to see more people come to Christ – but it didn't work!

But some very, very good things did come out of my sect-time (and from the five years of trying to rebuild my faith, and then from the past two wonderful years):

1) I discovered the more beautiful gospel: the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth, which can bring us into relationship with God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit!

2) I realised that we aren't going to spread the gospel by **convincing** people (either by persuasive words or by acts of power); my aim has wrongly always been to convince other people that I am (well, we are) **right**; ergo, they are wrong.

Putting those two together: the gospel is not about our being **right**, it's about our being in a right relationship with God and about having a right relationship with people around us, and **that** is what is going to spread the good news of Jesus.

But not without spiritual warfare – of which more anon.

Now, one other theme that's been smacking me between the eyes recently is what the Bible says about good works. Do you remember how amazed I was when I discovered Matthew 25?! Jesus clearly teaches that the decision as to who are sheep and who are goats is based on whether they have cared for the poor and marginalised!<sup>[63]</sup> Those are Jesus' words, not mine!

Then, when I checked the context of my oft-quoted '*all scripture is God-breathed*' (2 Tim 3:16), I saw that if I had bothered to read the rest of the sentence (v.17), I'd have heard Paul saying, '*so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*'.

But we've totally missed the importance of good works because (since the Reformation?) we've been absolutely petrified that anyone might think we're suggesting that you can be **saved** by good works and not '**BY FAITH ALONE**'. We quote Eph 2:8,9: '*For it is by **grace** you have been **saved**, through faith ... **not by works***' but again, we've neglected the context: the very next verse says: '*For [i.e. **because**] **we are ... created in Christ Jesus to do good works.***' (v.10)

I've come to believe, more powerfully than ever, that without good works, my faith is dead, **the** faith is dead, we are dead, the gospel is dead. Good works are the beating heart of the gospel.

When James says (2:14), 'What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? **Can such faith save him?**' we rush to defend our '**by faith alone**' idea.

Brothers and sisters, we need urgently to engage in spiritual warfare – on a daily basis – so that in any and every situation we may preach the gospel **in the good works we do**. We don't need to be persuaders; we don't need to have the gift of healing; we just need to love people in the power of the Spirit.

So we need to engage in what I might call 'spiritual warfare works'. And this is something we can all do, without fear, and without causing offence, without putting people off by our 'we have the right answer' attitude. And **then** numbers of people will be saved.

Isn't that what God wants of us? That's the God who so desperately loves and longs for the people around us – both the people we love desperately and the people we bump into on the street or on the internet!

*Lord, please help me to put on your armour – of defence and attack – to pray constantly for the people around me, so that I may share your love with them, for their own sake, to lighten their lives. And as I do so, please help them to see Jesus, to see **the gospel**, in me! Help me to be a bridge over troubled water, to lead them into your loving, outstretched, cross-shaped arms.*

Lord, let it be so! Please!

Paul Bev. 16.4.19

## **69 The offence of the gospel**

I've already told you<sup>[08]</sup> about an awful situation I experienced when helping to run an evangelistic course once: the leader asked the assembled group, 'If you arrived at the gates of heaven and wanted to be allowed in, what would you say?' Setting aside for a moment the vision of heaven as a walled and gated compound(!), you can imagine the responses that attendees came up with. 'Actually, those are all wrong,' announced the leader, 'The Bible says that, however hard we try, we can never be good enough, because God is holy. But the good news is that God loves us so much that he provides a way through which we can get into heaven.' Well, I can't remember his exact words, but that was the gist.

Afterwards, I challenged the leader about this and asked whether he realised what a negative impression he had given. His response was to point out (words to the effect that), 'Yes, but the Bible teaches that the gospel **will** offend people. Our responsibility is simply to preach the gospel, and if people reject it, then that's their responsibility.' And I think he might have even quoted '*The god of this age has blinded their minds of unbelievers.*' (2 Cor 4:4)

Thinking about it again, I started asking myself whether 'the offence of the Gospel' really is a biblical concept. Maybe it's just an excuse for our botched attempts to put across 'the gospel' (sin and a holy God)? Maybe it's just our lack of sensitivity to our hearers that is causing offence, and not the gospel per se?

So to check its biblical veracity, I Googled 'the offence of the Gospel'. (Well, why repeat the biblical spadework when someone else has probably already done it.) I looked at the first website that came up, read (bits of) it and wished I hadn't. It was horrendous! From the picture, Bill looked a regular nice, smiley chap but words fail me to describe his 'I'm right' (disguised as 'the Bible teaches') attitude, as he hatefully commented on a range of issues (you can probably guess some of them), including Notre Dame, even before anyone knew the cause of the fire. Still, it saved me searching for the scriptures myself, but it was a sobering experience to see what we're up against in trying to witness to our loved ones, and trying to assure them that, yes, Jesus really did preach 'love your enemies'.

Here, with the context **included**, are the proof-texts used to justify 'the offence of the gospel', i.e. to claim that the Bible teaches 'if we preach the gospel, people **will** be offended'.

*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, **but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles**, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor 1:18-24)*

Is this saying that people in general will be offended if we 'fearlessly preach the gospel'? Or is it just that the cross is a stumbling block to the **Jews**? Well, if you're saying to devout Jews that Jesus is God, Jesus is the Messiah, and that God (Jesus) was crucified, then that might indeed be a cause for offence. But people in general? today? No, I don't think that's what it's saying.

*I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be. Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case **the offence of the cross has been abolished.** (Gal 5:10,11)*

Are people in general going to be offended by issues to do with circumcision? I think not! (Another scripture quoted out of context.)

*For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "**The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,**" and, "**A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.**" They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:6-9)*

This sounds to me as if it's referring to the way the Messiah was rejected by the religious leaders of the day. I can't see how you can use it as an excuse for preaching the good news in a way that causes offence to people in general. (Maybe the term 'good news' is a clue that we shouldn't expect the gospel to cause offence.)

So, once again, as with 'the wages of sin',<sup>[52]</sup> Christians are ripping biblical phrases out of context and to justify their own views.

If we preach the gospel (the narrative of Jesus) then any ‘offence’ we cause is likely to be because we failed to do so ‘with gentleness and respect’ (1 Pet 3:5)

Yes, the cross is an offence, an utter and total scandal, but not in the sense that Bill Muehlenberg uses it. And, yes, we need to restore the scandal of the cross, if we’re to see how the cross is so much bigger and more powerful and more life-changing and culture-changing than I had ever realised <sup>[13,14,46-49]</sup> (*Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, Mark Baker and Joel Green).

Paul Bev. 17.4.19

## 70 The more beautiful gospel

(Numbers in square brackets [] refer to others of my articles at: <http://www.archivepub.co.uk/thoughts>)

Life is a journey, the Christian life is a journey – and for me that’s 70 years and 50 years, respectively – but the past two years have been the most exciting of both, as my faith has grown and developed dramatically.

In the past 9 months, I’ve started writing short articles, each a thousand words or so – I guess you’d call them ‘blogs’. This has been my way of processing my thinking about my faith; and this is blog number 70. I’ve shared that journey with a group of friends, and have now put the articles up on my (work) website. I’ve never read my Bible so much, or read so many Christian books, so you’ll gather that I am highly motivated (obsessed?) – plus, I’ve had more time, being partly retired.

My first article, ‘Full Circle’ (you can find it as [0]), was written two years ago when I first ‘discovered’ the love of the Trinity, and got really excited by what I had ‘found’. I wrote it because, as I looked back over my life as a Christian, I could see how God had been at work, including a period, about 7 years ago, when I reached spiritual rock bottom and wondered whether God even existed – maybe the Christian faith was just made-up wishful thinking?!

In fact, this article has mutated since I first wrote it, to try to make it more accessible to people who haven’t walked with me through those 70 articles, and also because, having ‘discovered’ a more beautiful gospel I find that I’ve become dogmatic myself. So if you decide to read any of my earlier articles please realise that they are my immediate reactions. Indeed, I might not even agree now with some of the views I expressed then.

Also, this article comes with a...

*Health warning:* This contains much over-simplification (to cram 80,000 words into 2000) and definitely some over-statement for effect. I’m contrasting my faith as it was (left column) with where I am in my journey now (right column), so it sounds as if I’m saying that one view is right and the other is wrong – rather, I see it as a spectrum of views. Worse still, I have pushed the left-hand view to its logical conclusion, and deliberately given some of its more extreme expressions, but only to show how it can unnecessarily cause unbelievers to completely write off the Christian faith.

My writing spree started when my friend ‘Martha’<sup>[1]</sup> felt that her church was saying that she should ‘share the gospel’ with x-number of her friends and family. She was very honest, and admitted to me that she didn’t want to tell them that they were sinners bound for hell. So I wanted to help her (and myself) to find a way to present the gospel more effectively, but in those nine months, my understanding of what the gospel actually *is* has moved, and the difference is fairly stark as I have tried to present here, over-simplification notwithstanding.

My aim here is to help us find a way to present the gospel that people in the 21st century can actually understand and relate to ... and believe! But remember that the two columns aren’t an either/or option, there could be a degree of both/and. Also, you could push my views to an extreme and think that I’m saying ‘All you need is love’ and ‘It doesn’t matter what you believe’ or even ‘Everyone will be saved anyway’. No, I’m not that extreme.

|                                                                                                      | <b>The gospel seen more as <i>proposition and transaction</i></b>                                                                                                                                                                            | <b>The gospel seen more as <i>relationship and mystery</i></b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>The gospel:</b>                                                                                   | The <i>proposition</i> is that God is holy, you aren't, Jesus died to take the punishment that you deserve. The <i>transaction</i> is that, by believing that this is true, you can receive new life now and a place in heaven when you die. | The narrative of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus; through his death <b>for us</b> (as affirmed in the traditional creeds <sup>[16]</sup> ), we come into <i>relationship</i> with God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a <i>mystery</i> <sup>[15]</sup> that we can explore and enjoy our whole life long. |
| <b>The cross:</b>                                                                                    | The centre point of history, where Jesus took my punishment, to set me free from God's wrath.                                                                                                                                                | Don't even <i>think</i> of trying to sum up the cross in a phrase, or even a couple of sentences. I have tried to unpack the centrality of the cross a little in 15 of my articles <sup>[4,10,13,17,35,46-50,52-54,60,63]</sup> .                                                                                                   |
| <b>Evangelism:</b> (not actually, a word that appears in the Bible, so better...)<br><b>Witness:</b> | <b>Evangelism</b> – getting people to 'hear the gospel', in church or at a rally, or by using 'Two ways to live', 'Four spiritual laws', etc. to tell them the gospel.                                                                       | <b>Witness</b> – living out the love of God, caring for people, being there for them when life is a bitch; and then, when they ask... 'Always be prepared to give an answer ... But do this with gentleness and respect.' (1 Pet 3:5)                                                                                               |
| <b>Man's main problem:</b>                                                                           | Sin as moral failure, which alienates us from God – God therefore turns his back on us.                                                                                                                                                      | Sin as self-focused independence, by which we alienate ourselves from God's love.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Solution:</b>                                                                                     | Jesus took the punishment that we deserve ( <i>the wages of sin is death</i> , Rom 6:23 – commonly misquoted <sup>[52]</sup> ): eternal separation from God.                                                                                 | Jesus willingly died for us, to restore us to relationship with God. ( <i>United with him in a death like his, we also will rise with him</i> , Rom 6:5.)                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Main model or metaphor:</b>                                                                       | Crime and punishment.                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Enemy love ( <i>while we were still sinners Jesus died for us...</i> Rom 5:8).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Secondary model or metaphor:</b>                                                                  | None needed because, without Jesus' substitutionary death, there is no salvation. But maybe 'the bridge': a great chasm separates us from God, but Jesus' cross makes a bridge so that we can get back to God.                               | [ <i>How long have you got?! The list of articles under 'The Cross', above, is a good starter.</i> ] Outrageous undeserved love (e.g. prodigal father); restoration; redemption; wholeness (shalom); rescue; victory over sin, evil and death; etc.; etc.                                                                           |
| <b>God seen primarily as:</b>                                                                        | Judge.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Loving father, loving mother, lover ( <i>all biblical images</i> ).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>God seen secondarily as:</b>                                                                      | Loving, and therefore sending Jesus to die for us.                                                                                                                                                                                           | Love! God <b>IS</b> love (1 Jn 4:7-21) – glorious!                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>God's main action:</b>                                                                            | Deciding whether you're going to heaven or hell.                                                                                                                                                                                             | Coming down into the crap of life, search and rescue, restoration, redeeming, etc., etc.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Central message:</b>                                                                              | <b>INDIVIDUAL</b> salvation – 'Leave everybody out of it; it's between you and God', as one evangelistic website said. <sup>[6]</sup>                                                                                                        | <b>RELATIONSHIP</b> , covenant, kingdom, family, belonging to one another.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Effect of evangelism (witness):</b>                                                               | As you evangelise, people either believe it and are saved OR they think you are deluded, bigoted, self-righteous, etc.; this is apparently caused by 'the offence of the gospel' (not a biblical idea in my view <sup>[69]</sup> ).          | As you witness, they understand that you love them. They are helped, encouraged and affirmed – all positive things that any human would want (and presumably things that Jesus himself would do if he were here).                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Your main role:</b>                                                                               | Persuader: 'Believe this' or 'Come to this meeting': telling, arguing, refuting, proving, defending.                                                                                                                                         | Lover: 'God loves you, and so do I!': <b>listening</b> (absolutely crucial!), empathising, discussing, sharing.                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Effect of your input:</b>                                                                         | Too easily emphasises differences and disagreements – <b>I</b> think/believe/do this ... <b>YOU</b> think/believe/do that.                                                                                                                   | Need for drawing near, uniting, oneness, identification, empathy – convey that <b>WE</b> are in this together.                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

|                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Acceptance by God?</b>            | Not unless and until they believe.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | God loves us unconditionally (fact!); but we can choose to turn away.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Strategy:</b>                     | Get alongside them in order to tell them the good news.<br>To concentrate on influential people is a good strategy – especially celebrities who they can then persuade others.                                                                                                                                                                | Get alongside them for their own sake, just because God loves them.<br>Concentrate on ‘the most important person’ <sup>[59]</sup> , i.e. <b>all</b> are welcome.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>What if they reject?</b>          | At what stage do we move on to someone else who is more receptive?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | But God hasn’t rejected them! God still loves them and so do you!                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>If they accept:</b>               | Ensure that they are disciples: read the Bible, pray and evangelise. Do this last quickly, before their enthusiasm wanes and/or their friends get fed up. (Am I being cynical or realistic?!)                                                                                                                                                 | Continue to encourage, support, pray and share your knowledge of the Bible, encourage them to pray for the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) – an incredibly powerful witness <sup>[64]</sup> !                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Attitude to family:</b>           | They will go to hell, so I <b>must</b> tell them the gospel.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Reach out in loving trust. <i>There is no fear in love. Perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment.</i> (1 Jn 4:18 + 1 Cor 7:14).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Main emotions for family:</b>     | Fear that they are going to hell, and/or guilt for not telling them.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Love for them, and longing that they come to know Jesus as their friend.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Secondary emotions:</b>           | Striving and stress.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Relaxing in God’s love and enjoying spending time with them.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>The Bible:</b>                    | ‘The Word of God’ <sup>[5]</sup> . Everything must be tested by the Bible. Concern lest the Bible be ignored, misinterpreted or demeaned. Some say it’s infallible or inerrant <sup>[7]</sup> .                                                                                                                                               | Inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16,17) <sup>[7]</sup> but culturally conditioned, so use <b>faithful questioning</b> [3, and many others], check out how Jesus used the scriptures because only <b>THE</b> Word of God (Jesus) is infallible <sup>[6,15]</sup> .                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Attitude to moral issues:</b>     | The Bible is our ultimate standard for morality. The Bible tells us what is right and true. Our job is to influence society to stick to God’s moral standards (salt and light <sup>[61]</sup> ).                                                                                                                                              | The Bible is not primarily a manual for morality; the prime biblical principle is restoring and maintaining healthy relationships, justice, caring for the poor and marginalised, etc.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Attitude to illness:</b>          | Not really relevant, except perhaps for ‘power evangelism’ – proving the gospel by people seeing miracles.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | God hates it when people suffer, so empathise and help them if you can. God can heal: so pray for healing.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Attitude to the dying:</b>        | They need to hear the gospel before it’s too late!                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | It’s never too late, so hold their hand, assure them that they are loved by God and are safe in God’s hands.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Attitude to good works:</b>       | Beware, because some people think that doing good works leads to salvation. Do good works by all means, but evangelism is more important – how else will people get saved, if we don’t tell them?                                                                                                                                             | Doing good works is just what you do if you love someone – you serve them and care for them. God thinks it’s so important that he has prepared a specific set of good works for you to do (Eph 2:10).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>How might people perceive us?</b> | ‘Holier than thou’, because we try to tell them (a) what sin is (and they are sinners) (b) that they are going to hell and we’re going to heaven.<br>– Insistent that the Bible has all the answers about what is right for all time.<br><br>– Each denomination thinks it is right, and so others are wrong (to a greater or lesser extent). | Welcoming, loving, serving, inclusive, empathising with suffering, not pushing our views on others.<br><br>– Accepting that the Bible essentially tells us about Jesus, but while it’s powerful and exciting, that it’s written by fallible authors, and is culturally conditioned <sup>[5,7,28,36,39]</sup> .<br>– All churches are fallible and wrong to some extent, but we’re all trying to work together to spread God’s love, each in their own way. |

This more beautiful gospel is, I believe, faithful to the Bible's teaching, but it is rather different from what most of us have been taught, so it will take quite a long time to be accepted.

At the same time, I'm encouraged, because I believe that this more beautiful gospel is actually **attractive** to outsiders, and I see signs around me that it is drawing numbers of people into our churches and, hopefully, into relationship with our glorious God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Lord, may it be so, please!

Paul Bev. 1.6.19

P.S. If you have found this summary helpful, there's a nine-minute video that illustrates this more beautiful gospel. It's called 'the gospel in chairs' – sounds weird, I know – you can find it at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUWLcQAsgHs>. It's presented by a Canadian called Bruxy Cavey, and if you have difficulty catching some of what he says, I've 'translated' it into UK English as article <sup>[22]</sup>.

## 71 Love cuts the Gordian NOT

I thought that when I got to 70 (number of articles = age!) that was probably going to be it, but yesterday I started thinking about **original sin**. Would God (**could** God?!) exclude a baby that 'dies in sin'? So I looked up on Google to see what scriptures people used to support the idea.

Then, as I awoke this morning after a restless night, I also started to think of some other issues that I might need to tackle in future. I'll list some of them for you, but please don't pay too much attention to them because I had yet another penny-drop moment and leapt out of bed to write:

Original sin? – What's the issue? If a baby dies, will it be saved or **NOT**? This led to thoughts of:

Infant baptism? – Does baptism save you or **NOT**? If so, can a baby be saved by baptism or **NOT**? A huge one! My knowledge of church history isn't good, but weren't Christians killing each other at one stage over infant baptism? Seriously?! Is that what Christians were doing?! Unbelievable!

Unforgiveable sin? '*but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin.*' (Mark 3:29) Is there a sin that can definitely exclude you, or **NOT**? For example, is suicide an unforgiveable sin, or **NOT**?

Apostasy? '*It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened ... and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance.*' (Heb 6:4-6) Once you have you believed, if you then turn away, is it possible subsequently to be saved or **NOT**?

My penny-drop moment, at a stroke, cut through all these Gordian **NOTs**!

In all those issues, what are we asking? 'Is such and such a person in or out? Are they saved or not?' So what does Jesus say? Here's one familiar example:

*Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."* (Luke 13:1-5)

I think Jesus is saying, 'Stop worrying about **them**! Are **you** relating in love to your heavenly Father?!'



And not quite the same, I know, but as it's Easter let's look at Peter being recommissioned by Jesus: 'Do you love me?' Peter is asked three (annoying) times! And Peter's response?

*Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." (Jn 21:20-22)*

We just can't stop ourselves doing it, can we? 'Yes, but what about him?!'  
It's the same with all those issues above – it's all about 'them'. We're like a load of kids arguing about 'He had more than me', 'I was playing with it first', 'It's not fair! She's had two and I've only had one.'

All the time we want to argue (from the scriptures, of course!) who is in and who is out, who is saved and who is not. And all God wants to say is, 'You duffers! I love you all, equally.' And because God loves us so desperately, it's never, ever, ever too late for **anyone** to turn back to God. You know that God is absolutely **NOT** going to reject **anyone** at **any stage**, if they come back and say, 'Father I have sinned and am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men' – and before you've got even half of your prepared speech out, God's grabbed you, kissed you, hugged you and is throwing a party!

**THAT** is the kind of God that Jesus came to show us! So why the hell do we waste so much time and energy arguing about these secondary issues?! We can hardly blame our spouses or other family members who don't want to know about the church – they can see plainly what a total and utter waste it is to argue about that list of things I mentioned (and more besides).

But they do love **you** and they do relate to **you** – of course they do! It's not the (organised) church that is going to reach them with Jesus' love; it's you! So pray and pray and pray to be filled with the fruit of the Spirit. Enjoy spending time with them. And trust your loving heavenly Father to draw them in, even if it's at the very last minute. And actually, if you're relaxed about all this, and they can see that you don't give a monkey's for all these arguments, it's more and more likely that they'll open up to God's love sooner, and not wait until the very last minute.

That's on an individual basis, but surely it's the same on an organised church basis. If one church is always on about who's in and who's out, whether you've given your life to Jesus or not, and another church is always on about God's wonderful, all-encompassing love, I think even I can work out which of those two churches will attract people into God's loving embrace!

Lord, please let it be so among us!

Paul Bev. 19.4.19

## **72 Fear-based religion**

In article [70], I set out in two columns the contrast between my Christian faith of 2 or 3 years ago and what I now believe. Since then I've read a book that someone recommended as giving a good end-to-end view of the teaching of the Bible and I found a Bible on Sue's bookshelf, with Jesus' words highlighted in red, so I could pursue an idea I had of looking at how Jesus related to different types and groups of people, plus individuals. Both studies were eye-opening!

The book, *God's Big Picture* by Vaughan Roberts, turned out to be an extremely well-researched support of the left-hand column of [70]. Because the book was so well put together, I felt I ought to do it justice by explaining to my friend why I could no longer support that view. I've put my comments as article [0], as it will probably only be of interest if you have read the book.

Then my reading of what Jesus said to different people convinced me that what we actually say, and to whom, is very, very important. We really need to *listen* to people, so that we can know where they are at; and just because something is *true* doesn't mean that it's the right thing to say. I have quoted before:

*“Always be prepared to give an **answer** to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with **gentleness and respect.**”* (1 Peter 3:15)

My recent studies have reinforced my view that the church has, to a greater or lesser extent, become a fear-based religion. This is because we see the gospel as totally predicated on the idea that, because we are sinners, we incur God's wrath – that's the problem, and Jesus is the solution.

If outsiders visit those churches that like to “preach the gospel” regularly, they will hear repeatedly that they are sinners. And, however hard we try to say that “we are *all* sinners”, the outsiders all too easily hear us telling them that *they* are sinners. And because we try to tell society what is right and wrong (being ‘salt and light’), they see us as saying that Christians are better than them – hence the repeated complaint of Christians being ‘holier than thou’.

And those who are willing to explore Christianity more closely can all too easily get the idea that God is angry with us because we sin. (In <sup>[8]</sup>, <sup>[14]</sup> and <sup>[18]</sup>, I've given my view of what the Bible means by God's wrath: it's *not* anger, but in love, he allows us to receive what our sin causes.)

OK, there will be a spectrum between fear-based religion and churches that really do promote a love-based relationship, but I feel that we need to do all we can to steer away from fear and towards love – and that's *exactly* what I saw by reading all of Jesus' actual words. The Scribes and Pharisees studied the scriptures and came up with a fear-based religion, but Jesus taught people about his loving heavenly Father – no wonder the people flocked to hear him!

One serious problem though is that, because our belief system is predicated on the idea of “sin and a holy God”, this then affects our reading of scripture and, indeed, it biases our very translation of the Bible. As I've argued in <sup>[5]</sup>, <sup>[7]</sup> and especially <sup>[11]</sup>, what we believe necessarily affects how we translate the scriptures.

But even if our Bible is *not* intrinsically loaded towards an over-emphasis on sin, our *interpretation* can still bias us away from viewing God principally as the Great Lover, and towards God as the Great Judge. And as I've discovered, the judgement-biased view can cause us to quote scriptures totally out of context.

The worst example I've seen is our total misuse “*the wages of sin is death*”. In Romans 6 (written to **believers**) Paul talks enthusiastically of our freedom from sin and our new life in Christ; he says that, having received life, we'd be bonkers to go on sinning, because *sin spoils* that wonderful new relationship. He underlines this in the very final verse: “*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” We then take those first seven words, totally out of context, and use it to tell **unbelievers**: “If you sin, you'll go to hell.” Forgive me, but that made me very angry when I realised what we had done <sup>[52]</sup>!

OK, gross misinterpretation of scripture is rare, but our over-emphasis on sin can lead us to the mistake that I referred to at the head of the article: we apply scriptural truths to people for whom they were never intended. Let me give you an example.

In a discussion the other day, someone said that John 3:16 clearly showed the reality of hell. Because there was someone in the group who was not a committed Christian, two of us were unhappy and spoke out, but to be honest it was just a gut reaction. I therefore decided to go home and check out the context – I've done several context-checks, since the Romans 6:23 debacle.

The explanation is long, but please bear with me; the result is very surprising. You must know John 3:16, which we use to tell unbelievers: “If you believe in Jesus you'll receive eternal life, but if you don't, you will perish.” And Jesus makes it even clearer for the unbeliever: “*Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe **stands condemned already** because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*”

Plain as a pikestaff! Listen, my dear unbelieving friend, I'm very sorry, but Jesus says to you "Because you don't believe in me, you **are** condemned already!"

Nooo! That is **not** what Jesus says to your average unbeliever!

**Check the context!!** In John 3, Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, a Pharisee; indeed, "a member of the Jewish ruling council" (v1). Jesus starts by complaining that they are **refusing** to believe in him: "*you people do not accept our testimony*" (v11). And although the Pharisees think they know what people have to do to please God, Jesus says: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that **anyone** who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" Nicodemus shifts uneasily in his seat: Is Jesus **really** saying that **anyone** can have eternal life, just by believing in him?! And as if reading his mind, Jesus adds, "**Whoever** believes in him is not condemned..."

And I'll bet Nicodemus is thinking, "What?! Even the tax collectors and the prostitutes?! Is he really saying they are not condemned, despite the fact that they sin all day every day?!"

Then Jesus hits Nicodemus hard with "...*but whoever does not believe **stands condemned already** because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*" This really shocks him! He's not daft; he knows darn well that Jesus is referring to **him**! Jesus is saying, "You Pharisees say you believe in the scriptures – you study them diligently – yet you **refuse** to believe in me. [John 5:39,40] Therefore **you are already condemned!**"

Jump now to 2019, and look at what we do with these words that were addressed to a Pharisee, words that Jesus was using to shock him into realising what a terrible thing the Pharisees were doing – seeking to condemn God's own son. We apply these words to **unbelievers**, to warn them that if they don't believe in Jesus, they will perish – they will be condemned.

Quick! I need an antidote to all this fear-based religion:

*There is no fear in love. But **perfect love drives out fear**, because fear has to do with **punishment**. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.* (1 Jn 4:18)

*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full* (Jn 10:10).

Ah, that's better – and there are lots more, positive, love-based, affirming scriptures where those ones came from! Praise God!

(Oh hang on! Quick hypocrisy test here: check your own contexts, Paul! ... Yes, it's OK, the whole of 1 John 3 and 4 is about love. And John 10? Yes, that's all about love too. Phew!)

Finally, here's a quick summary of some scriptures we've misapplied, in the name of convincing people about sin and a holy God:

| Scripture                                                   | Spoken to                | About                                                     | We apply it to | To say                                                              |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Romans 6:23<br>(the wages of sin)                           | believers                | life in Jesus                                             | unbelievers    | repent or perish                                                    |
| John 3:16-18<br>(whoever believes)                          | Pharisees                | their refusal to believe                                  | unbelievers    | repent or perish                                                    |
| Romans 1 (wrath of God revealed against sin) <sup>[8]</sup> | believers                | don't you dare judge other people! Rom 2:1 <sup>[8]</sup> | unbelievers    | you deserve to be punished for your sin                             |
| Jn 14:6 (the way, the truth and the life)                   | Jesus' closest disciples | follow me to get closer to the Father                     | unbelievers    | Jesus is the only way to be saved (I'll study this again some time) |

## 73 What is this good news?

*(This was written as a discussion starter for a vicar friend and a highly theological lay reader friend, prior to meeting for a chat about “What is the gospel?” on June 18th. Any comments would be very much appreciated. Thanks, PB.)*

I’ve recently done a bit of a survey of Jesus’ preaching, teaching and healing in the Gospels, and of the church’s preaching, teaching and healing in Acts, and the clear pattern that I am seeing is that there isn’t a clear pattern!

The strongest theme in Jesus’ preaching seems to be the kingdom. And what struck me most from Acts was their insistence on the lordship of Christ. So, what is the good news? (I’m deliberately not calling it the ‘gospel’ to avoid stereotyping.)

(I did *try* to write this to express it for other Christians, but I’m so obsessed with reaching out to non-Christians that it has come out as an evangelistic pitch, sorry.)

### **The good news in < 500 words:**

- God is love, i.e. God’s essential nature is loving relationship.
- Out of that love, God created humankind and intended that this love should be shared among humans, and between humans and God.
- Humans felt that God was trying to dominate them, so we tried to do it our own way, and it all went horribly wrong (we use the term, ‘sin’).
- God is love, and so God went to great lengths to rescue us out of the mess we had created.
- God is holy, yet when Jesus was born, God willingly came in human form into the mess we had created, and Jesus showed us what real love is; i.e. Jesus showed us what God is really like.
- Jesus taught his followers about a new kind of kingdom: yes, God is a holy God, and yet we can relate to God as a loving heavenly father! That’s the good news that Jesus preached!
- We humans couldn’t cope when faced with the pure goodness of God in human form, and we reacted by killing Jesus.
- Out of his love for us, Jesus allowed himself to be killed, thus demonstrating his kingdom of enemy love: ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.’
- Three days later, Jesus rose from death, with a new body – still a physical body (he ate and drank) yet somehow different.
- Jesus taught that, through his death, humans could have a new kind of life, in a new kind of kingdom, where the self-sacrificing king was Jesus the Christ, Jesus as the Lord.
- Jesus then left the earth and returned to God the Father, telling his followers to spread the message: through Jesus’ death, relationships can be renewed – and that’s good news!
- To become part of Jesus’ kingdom, we need a total rethink of how we run our lives: we call this ‘repentance’ – a total change of mindset.
- We have to accept that our old way of running our life is bankrupt – it just doesn’t work.

- We need to believe and trust in Jesus: that he really was who he said he was (God come to earth) and that through his death we can find life – life in all its fullness, as God intended.
- When we believe in Jesus, God actually comes to live within us, to give us the power we need to put God’s new way of living (Jesus’ kingdom) into practice.
- If you recognise that without God, your life is bankrupt, tell God so.
- If you believe that Jesus died so that you could have life, tell Jesus so.
- If you believe that God wants to live in you through his Holy Spirit, ask God to fill you – and God will become part of your life in a new and wonderful way.

Paul Bev. 5.6.19

## 74 ‘And here is the news’

In my previous article, I tried to define ‘the good news’, but I was unhappy about my definition, even after sharing it. Now, after my recent studies on ‘the kingdom’, I’m even more unhappy.

As I said in <sup>[73]</sup>, from my reading through the Gospels and Acts:

The strongest theme in Jesus’ preaching seems to be **the kingdom**.  
And what struck me most from Acts was their insistence on **the lordship of Christ**.

I looked back at my definition in <sup>[73]</sup> and was cross with myself because, after all I’d said in my articles, I had made it about ‘me and my salvation’. I then tried to broaden my definition out, to make it more about covenant or family or kingdom (remember that the Lord’s prayer has no ‘I’ or ‘me’ in it, anywhere!), but I couldn’t see how to stop my definition being so individual-based.

But why did I write the definition in the first place? As I said in <sup>[73]</sup>, I’m due to meet with two theologically aware friends with whom I’ve been discussing my ideas ... and not always agreeing. Not wanting to just run over areas of disagreement, I suggested that we talked about: How can we best communicate the good news? (and my subtext was ‘especially to men’!)

But one of them made what I thought was a good point: How can we discuss how to communicate the good news unless and until we agree what the good news actually is?

If you remember, in <sup>[70]</sup>, I contrasted what I once thought of as the good news (that Jesus offers a solution to the problem of sin), with what I now think it is (the narrative of Jesus’ life, death, etc.)

Maybe the reason that my 20+ husbands of believing wives won’t believe is that we’re trying to convince them of something they can’t relate to? What if the ‘good news’ is actually different things to different people. Is that such a heretical idea?!

Seeing the good news in terms of penal substitution really isn’t too helpful for some people – ‘pastorally inappropriate, to say the least’, as one of my two friends said. And I’ve said that we must treat people as individuals – one of our most important evangelistic tools is our ears.

Anyway, if we want to define the good news then we should at least start from the scriptures and let them teach us; we need to resist the temptation to start with our definition and show how each of the scriptures fits that definition.

So where did this ‘good news’ start? It started with John the Baptist, then moved on to Jesus and then to the apostles and the disciples:

John answered them all, 'I baptise you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will **burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.**' And with many other words John exhorted the people and **preached the good news** to them. (Luke 3:16-18)

'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to **preach good news to the poor.** He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' ... 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.' (Luke 4:18-21)

'The time has come,' [Jesus] said. 'The kingdom of God is near. **Repent and believe the good news!**' (Mark 1:15)

You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling **the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.** (Acts 10:36)

Are all these good newses the same thing? Can one definition incorporate John's hellfire preaching, Jesus' reassurance to the poor that 'theirs is the kingdom of heaven', and the apostles' good news that Jesus is 'the Christ' and 'the Lord of all'?

I'm not sure that you **can** form a definition; there is no clear pattern that I can see. Yes, we might be able to define what it is **not**, but I'm really not convinced that God is interested in precise definitions of the way God works.

Now, I'm a words man, so I look at the meanings of words, and this helps me learn new things. So what do we think when we hear, 'And here is the news'? We know that we're going to hear several 'items of news'.

So is 'the gospel' just one single item of news that we can define, package and sell (albeit that we have to use different techniques to sell it to different types of people)?

Or could it be more fundamental than that? Could the 'good news' actually be different for different people? Does the multi-millionaire who discovers that money can't buy love need the same good news as the meths-drinker; does the serious and responsible school-teacher need to hear the same good news as the happy-go-lucky street musician; and what about someone who has had a string of terrible health issues (or whose spouse has), or the victim of sexual abuse...?

As we pray for each of these people, and if we can introduce each of them to the historic Jesus then surely the Holy Spirit can give each one of them, according to their needs, an understanding of how Jesus' death on the cross can be 'for them'?

But look at what I'm doing yet again! I'm trying to work out how I can convince each person that we have the right answer for their needs. Is that **really** what the kingdom of God is about?! If they are poor, they need feeding, if they are in some form of prison, they need releasing. This is much more costly than just 'telling them the gospel'.

I need to go back to God and see what it means to preach the good news of the kingdom.

Paul Bev. 9.6.19

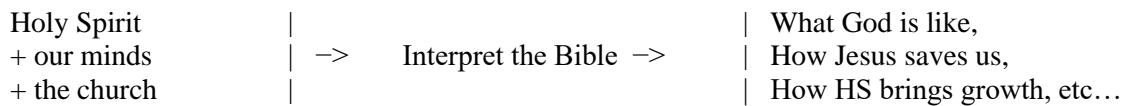
## **75 What is (the kingdom of) God like?**

Many people see God primarily as a holy God who can't abide sin and who will punish us for our wrongdoing – but he loves us, and he sends Jesus to provide a way of escape. So if we want to know if that's what God is really like, maybe we need to listen to what Jesus (the Word of God) says by his words and actions?

In my studies, I haven't noticed Jesus describing his heavenly Father like that, but he does talk a lot about the kingdom. This is not a concept I know much about, but if Jesus talks about it, I'd better find out! In response to my request for books on the subject, one of you recommended Albert Nolan's *Jesus before Christianity*. Thank you!

Nolan says that, although we can read what Jesus said and did, because we're living 2000 years after the event, and in a totally different culture, it's difficult to decide what he actually *meant* by the things he said. But Nolan is very helpful in that he also looks at other sources – contemporary historical documents – to help us to understand Jesus in his context.

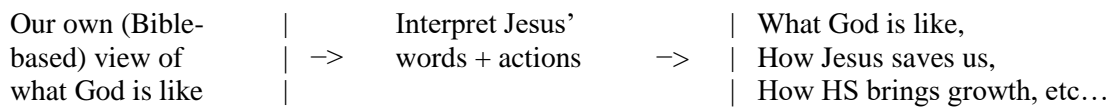
OK, so we start with the Bible, we apply our minds and we thankfully have the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We might like to think that's all we need in order to decide what Jesus meant, but actually we also rely hugely on what the scholars and teachers of the church (such as Nolan) have to say. People have spent lifetimes studying the Bible and have shared their insights with us, to help us understand what God is like. Here's how I see this in diagrammatic terms:



That may be how we have to approach this, but Nolan encourages us to ask first what it was like for the early church, what did *they* understand Jesus to mean? And what claims did Jesus make for himself. Did he actually claim to be God? Indeed, did he give himself any titles?

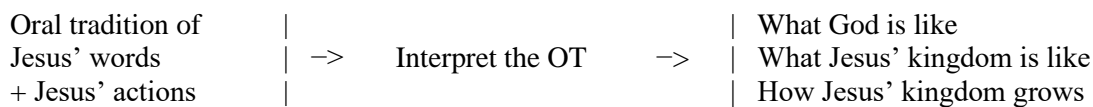
As I followed Nolan, looking at what Jesus said, in the context of the Jews' expectations of a coming Messiah, I was surprised at how little Jesus actually claimed. He just seems to state things as self-evident in the light of what he was doing, in terms of bringing in God's kingdom.

Don't worry, Nolan is absolutely clear that Jesus is divine, but he is very rigorous in *not* starting from a view of what God is like, and then using that view to interpret Jesus' words and actions:



Nolan points out that Jesus never intended to start a new religion; indeed, Jesus went to great pains to show how religion had trapped and enslaved people. Rather, he started a movement – what he called a kingdom. Initially, it was a rag-bag of individuals who met him, were massively impacted, and even claimed to have met him again and been taught by him *after* he had died.

The early church didn't have the Bible (well, not the NT, anyway), so how did they know what it meant to follow Jesus? They had the oral teachings of Jesus, plus the Old Testament, so here's how I picture that:



(Note my [not so] subtle changes in the results of the interpretation.)

It was this movement, this kingdom, that spread like wildfire and turned the world upside down, transforming people's lives, setting them free from many of the things that bound them – including religion. God's kingdom brought healing, reconciliation (with God and with man), wholeness, love, joy; it broke down barriers of race, class and religion – it was revolutionary!

Sadly, what started as a movement, pretty soon grew structures and rules and religion and dogmas and writings – reams and reams of it over the years.

And today, for the best of reasons, having studied our Bibles, we have decided what God requires of us and tried to spread that knowledge to any and all who will listen. But is that the way we should be doing it today? Does that actually *work*?! Was that the way the early church spread?

I'm beginning to wonder if we should get back to an emphasis on the kingdom of God, here on earth as it is in heaven – which is what Jesus taught us to pray! What would it take? But anyway, what does it *mean*?!

I certainly haven't got it all worked out, but what I *think* I have done, this past two years, is to go back more to what Jesus actually taught and did, and tried to interpret the Bible in the light of those words and actions – especially, trying to view the Old Testament as Jesus saw it.

And what's coming through to me strongly at the moment is that God's kingdom – God's 'good news' – is very much in the here and now, and not just about 'going to heaven when you die'. And this is also coming through from another book I've started reading – again a friend's recommendation about the kingdom: Tom Wright's *Surprised by Hope*.

I tried, in article <sup>[73]</sup>, give an answer to 'What is the gospel?' but as I said in <sup>[74]</sup> I was unhappy with what I wrote because it was still very personal salvation based, and I didn't feel that this was really the 'good news of the kingdom' as Jesus preached it.

My journey is very much ongoing, as I seek to learn more about God's kingdom. So please talk to me! Let's try to understand together more about this glorious new kingdom and how we can be the answer to our own prayer: 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'

Lord, let it be!

Paul Bev. 18.6.19

## **76 How do we communicate God's love today?**

On my journey of faith-and-writing these past months (almost a year now), those of you who have been following me, will have seen how my views have migrated. OK, there was a sea-change when I first 'discovered' the Trinity <sup>[0]</sup>, a couple of years ago, but what I mean by migrated is that there have been other changes, even to the extent of disagreeing with myself!

But when I 'discovered' the concept of restorative justice <sup>[2]</sup>, through Derek Flood's excellent book, *Healing the Gospel*, I became convinced that the metaphor of penal substitutionary atonement (PSA), as retributive justice, was simply wrong – that it was a mistaken interpretation of scripture.

OK, I may have expressed it in terms of 'I used to think... but now I've realised that I was wrong, and this is the truth', but actually that was exactly the same as saying that 'I'm (now) right and you are wrong'. I may have switched my view, but I had maintained my dogmatism! In my defence, I have been very excited by discovering the more restorative view of the good news – indeed, it has transformed my life – but that's really no excuse for my dogmatism. Sorry!

In an effort to make this good news available to others, I have been looking at other biblical metaphors to help us appreciate the good news <sup>[1]</sup>: reconciliation, redemption, acceptance, forgiveness, defeating evil, satisfaction for sins, restoration, rebirth, and I've since realised that adoption is another helpful metaphor.

As I talked more, read more, studied my Bible more, and talked with Christian friends who were still supportive of PSA, I came to accept that I had been wrong to write it off totally. Where I have reached now is to agree with one of those friends, who said that he accepted that, for certain people and in certain circumstances, PSA is 'not pastorally sensitive, to say the least'.

To see how pastoral sensitivity can be important in communicating the good news, think about people who have had bad relationships (perhaps abusive) with their human fathers; for them, talking about God as Father isn't the helpful. While it is still true that God is our heavenly Father, that is not the most helpful way to introduce them to the Person we hope they will come to know and love.



So, let's look at what someone will have to understand and appreciate if they are to come to faith through the PSA model.

To start with, people need an understanding that God is utterly holy and cannot abide sin. But in the 21st century, very few people outside the church have any understanding of the biblical concept of 'sin'. To most people 'sin' is the sort of naughty stuff you read about in the News of the World, which places sin 'out there' and of little relevance to me because, 'I try to live a good life, help other people, love my family, give money to charity, etc'.

So then people need to understand that because we are thoroughly sinful (from birth?), therefore God will punish us for our sin and for our rebellion against God's authority.

Once we've got that across, we can get to the really good news that, because God loves us, he has sent his son to die for us. Then we need to explain how Jesus takes our sin upon himself (an interesting concept).

Then, because Jesus has had our sin laid upon him, God turns away from Jesus, and God punishes Jesus instead of us; Jesus is separated from his loving heavenly Father: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Once people have understood all this, they are in a position to pray a prayer of confession and to receive Jesus into their lives by faith.

As I've written this, it has made me realise just what a complicated and unintuitive metaphor PSA is. It's not surprising that we feel that we have to use metaphors to try to explain this metaphor. For example, the Alpha Course uses the demands of the Nazis that a number of people must be killed, and an unmarried priest offers to die instead of a man who has a wife and family at home.

If PSA is the only metaphor, then we have no choice but to try to get all this across to people; if PSA is the predominant metaphor then even if people come to faith through other metaphors, we will have to explain PSA to them at some stage.

So where I am today is that if we want to get people to come to faith in the 21st century, I'm not convinced that explaining PSA is the best approach. So please, let's think of different ways to communicate God's wonderful love for us.

Paul Bev. 22.6.19

## ***77 A growing understanding***

Walking along a path this week with our rising-two grandson, Zac, we pointed out his shadow, and got him to wave – and the shadow waved back! As he gets a bit older, he'll probably then think that his shadow is 'attached' – however fast he runs, he can't get away. As he continues to grow in understanding, he'll realise that his shadow isn't a 'thing', but it's created by a lack of sunshine. But there's no way we could explain that to him now – it would be totally unhelpful.

At one stage, humankind thought that the world was earth-centric, and that the sun and moon revolved around the earth (OK, that's partly true!), but if some extra-terrestrials had arrived, and tried to explain that the earth was revolving around the sun, and was also spinning on its axis, they would probably have been locked up for being loopy. Indeed, didn't Galileo get it in the neck for suggesting that the earth revolved round the sun?

At one stage, Christians thought that the universe was created in six days – literally six periods of 24 hours – and it's not all that long ago that some Christians tried to insist that this should be taught in schools. Being realistic, as our scientific knowledge has increased, we've had to swallow our pride, as Christians, admit that we were wrong and rethink our interpretation.

Most Christians would now accept that the creation story, while it is definitely conveying truth, is not doing so in a literal, scientific way. Indeed, as with Zac's shadow, a scientific explanation would have been meaningless to its

hearers. In any case, the aim of Genesis isn't to tell us **how** God created the universe, but **that** God created the universe, and also **why** God created the universe. Trying to insist on a literal six-day creation has been thoroughly counter-productive in terms of our witness to those who don't yet share our faith.

At one stage, Christians thought that it was perfectly right and proper to beat children; indeed, I understand that until relatively recently some Christians were still trying to insist on their right to continue to do so. This flies in the face of research showing the psychological damage that can be caused by our inflicting corporal punishment.

As Christians, we all want to base our beliefs on the Bible, but even though we believe that it is God-inspired, we still have to interpret it, and so we need to be (a) very careful in our interpreting and (b) realistic enough to accept that with some things we simply don't know and (c) humble enough to admit that it is not absolute truth, but is only our interpretation – fellow Christians, might interpret the scriptures differently – and (d) flexible enough to be willing to alter our interpretation in the light of humankind's growing knowledge about the universe. Inflexible dogmatism is a killer, and it seems to me that this dogmatism was what made Jesus most angry.

Let's look at one or two more issues with possibly changing interpretation.

Forty-odd years ago, in our first teaching posts, Sue had a colleague who started living with her boyfriend, and when they invited us round for a meal, we had a decision to make. They were clearly wrong in what they were doing, so we reckoned, but 'She's still my friend', said Sue. That perhaps sounds a little quaint now, or is it that we Christians are allowing our standards to slip?! Should we be continuing to insist that it's wrong to 'live in sin'; and what about divorce, is that a sin? And should divorced people remarry?

And then there's the gay issue. What is a Christian to think/do about that? Can we (should we?) change our views? Can our 'clear teaching of scripture' be maintained? Is it OK to reinterpret scripture in the light of new knowledge and new understandings of the human condition, and in the light of changes in culture?

When we interpret scripture, we do have to accept that it was written by humans and written for a particular cultural time, so to apply those writings to the current time and the current culture requires great care, and I feel that, above all, we must resist dogmatism.

It's on this principle that I've been able to more easily come to terms with some of the OT passages where God seems to be sanctioning – even instructing the Israelites to commit – what we would now call genocide: killing all the men, women and children. That is how the human writers saw it at the time, in their existing culture, so we have to ask whether we can (should?) read these passages literally as God specifically telling them to do all this killing.

I'm not trying to give you answers here, just asking the questions. But I am saying that we have to be humble enough to be willing to change our interpretation of scripture – as we have in the past – in the light of new knowledge and new understandings. We need to allow ourselves and each other to faithfully question what we've always been taught, and ask if it's an acceptable interpretation today, and not just react and make accusations of 'watering down' God's word.

Jesus wasn't afraid to challenge the dogmatic views of his time, such as the place of children in society and the place of women in society. It seems to me that the key is relationships – that's what God is, and that, I believe, was Jesus' priority in his day.

(I'm busy thinking what God's kingdom might look like, and some of the ideas in this and the previous article are springing out of that, but I think there's more to come. If you want to help me in my thinking through some of these issues, do give me a shout.)

Paul Bev. 23.6.19

## 78 Learning from Tim's research

My Tim is now setting up as a consultant to international schools, and he's also planning to do a PhD. It all relates to helping schools grow, develop and improve, with particular reference to the international equivalent of OFSTED [please don't switch off, this is relevant!]. I've been proofreading the papers he's presented to schools and at international conferences, and I'm really thrilled and fascinated to see how there are such strong parallels between his (secular) educational thinking and my thoughts about faith and how we grow in our relationships.

I questioned in <sup>[77]</sup> whether it was possible for Christians to learn from some of humankind's increased knowledge about how the world works and about how humans function best and to apply that to our faith journey. And why not?! Can we learn anything from educational thought?

One obvious strand from education – and we don't need to wait for Tim's PhD research – is the need for positive reinforcement: children grow and develop better if we can tell them positive things about themselves and not keep pointing out their failings. OK, educationalists will argue about whether exams are a good thing or a bad thing, but we can all agree on the need for positive affirmation, rather than concentrating on exam results, whether they have passed or failed.

More than that (and this *is* part of Tim's thesis) children need to understand that they are an important part of the school community – each and every one of them – regardless of what they can actually 'achieve'; it's about accepting who you are and moving on from there, growing and developing.

Tim takes it further and says that the whole school must be a learning community; he suggests that if the children AND the teachers AND the parents are not actively learning, then it is not a good school. So it's not about reaching certain 'standards' – whether that's the school passing OFSTED, or the children passing exams – it's about whether they are growing, whether the whole community is moving forward, and growing *together*.

In other words, it's all about relationship! I find it a thrilling vision of what a school could and should be. It's not about, 'Have we passed the test?' (OFSTED or exams), but rather are we a community, in **relationship**? And this again links with my thinking.

And this is why I think it's so important that we develop our emphasis on the positive aspects of the good news that I mentioned in <sup>[76]</sup>: reconciliation, redemption, acceptance, forgiveness, defeating evil, satisfaction for sins, restoration, rebirth and adoption.

Yes, we (and schools) need to be realistic about sin (though they wouldn't use that term!), but if we want penal substitution to be our primary way of presenting the good news then we will have to keep reminding people about our sinfulness and failure. And that God is too holy to accept us because of our sin, and that will punish us God unless we believe in Jesus. That's hardly 'positive reinforcement', is it? That's why I'd rather present the good news in the more positive and affirming ways that the Bible provides.

And again, if we concentrate on penal substitution, then once people accept their sinfulness and believe, the danger is that they stop there and say 'Great, I'm saved!' and don't go much further. To avoid this, we have to lay stress on discipleship: we need to read our Bibles (and there's never enough time, as we all know) and pray (and we never seem to do enough) and witness to friends and family (and again we don't do that) and so it can all too easily become guilt-based, rather than relationship-based.

If instead of starting from sin and punishment, we start from relationship, then some of the other things can more easily follow – we want to read our Bibles and pray because we know that develops our relationship. Certainly, things changed for me when I 'discovered' the Trinity and found that the Christian faith really *is* about relationship. Since then (as a statement of fact, not as bragging), I have never studied the Bible so much or talked to God so much (I put it that way because I confess that I still don't do much intercessory praying) or talked to other people about my faith – the last to a fault, probably!

This stress on relationship started for me when I began to challenge the predominance of penal substitution in our thinking, and I when realised the importance that faithful questioning was a positive thing to do. And this idea of faithful questioning has parallels in Tim's work. The way he expresses it is that a school should be a research

community. In other words, it's OK for anyone to challenge the way things are done and to ask if there's a better way. People can take these ideas seriously and examine how they do things, but they have to be asking 'faithfully' (my word, not Tim's); that is, they must be asking for the good of the community, not as a negative, destructive challenge to authority.

Tim is trying hard to see how they can make OFSTED into a way of helping schools to grow and develop and move forward, and not just be a distraction from the 'real work', undertaken in order to 'tick the boxes'. Otherwise there's a real danger that schools just pass the OFSTED test and then stop growing and developing their community, their relationship.

And Tim's a million miles from seeing schools as places where teachers find the answers and teach the children what the answers are. People certainly used to think that it was the church leaders' job to study the scriptures and then teach us what to believe, and how to behave. Could that even still be how we think?

Don't get me wrong, I still think that sin matters, sin spoils lives, and that there is ultimately a heaven/hell type decision, but are there ways we can have a bit more positive reinforcement in our churches?

Answers on a postcard, please.

Paul Bev. 26.6.19

## 79 *Death by dogmatism*

Throughout my Christian life I've been dogged by (my own) dogmatism. As I explained in <sup>[0]</sup>, coming from a dysfunctional family, I discovered loving Christian relationships at Scargill House in the summer before starting college in 1968, and I embraced it wholeheartedly.

I went to the Cambridge CU freshers' sermon, where someone preached the gospel, and I gave my life to Christ. I had a superb Christian upbringing there – a good Bible base, weekly college CU Bible studies, brilliant Bible readings on Saturday nights from the likes of John Stott, good discipleship training, learning verses, daily quiet times, keeping my prayer diary, helping on Christian holidays and houseparties. An excellent start to my Christian life, which I have benefitted from over the years.

The downside? We were taught the supreme importance of correct theology. They explained how CICCU 'held the line', at the end of the 19th century, as the SCM started bringing in liberal theology; the various bits of wrong theology of the Catholic church were explained; and we were taught that the gifts of the Spirit were only provided by God for the early church.

I maintained a strongly conservative faith, but in 1983 (i.e. 15 years on), through a course ('How to love and be loved') written by Colin Urquhart, I re-found relationship, and was happier than I had ever been. Alongside that, I discovered experientially that the gifts had *not* died out with the early church, and so I became a strong advocate. With hindsight I see that, by concentrating on the gifts, the relationship side of things began to atrophy.

After 15 years of trying to persuade my conservative friends to embrace the gifts, I finally realised that I shouldn't be wasting my time persuading other Christians, and I built up a ministry of what I called 'internet evangelism' – chatting to people via email and trying to persuade them of the truth of the Christian faith. Thankfully, God graciously used my efforts, and some people did come to faith, although I'm not sure how many others I put off by my attitude.

The next stage started with a feeling that my own church was becoming more conservative and was not taking the gifts seriously enough. I started attending a Bible study with a chap who exercised powerful healing and prophetic gifts. I foolishly thought that this validated his teaching – he must be right if God was using him so powerfully. But the group got narrower by the year until we thought we were about the only Christian group in the UK that knew the true truth. Stupid of me, I know, but God allowed me to reach that ridiculous level of dogmatism to show me in no uncertain terms where dogmatism leads.

When I pulled out, I was virtually faith-less – does God exist, even? I then spent about five years trying to rebuild my faith, but it was still about ‘knowing what was right’. Then, in three days flat, we made the decision to leave the church we’d been part of for 37 years, although thankfully the decision was not based on dogmatism but on pragmatism: we were exhausted, being in the middle of an interregnum and living seven bad-traffic-miles from the church. Our leaving was sparked by neither theological nor personal disagreements.

It was only *after* we had left that I ‘discovered’ the Trinity (= relationship) and immediately got very excited – this love really was what I’d been searching for all my life. Once again I thought that I had ‘found the answer’.

But so much of ‘what I had always believed’ was being challenged that, last August, I started writing about my faith, as a way of processing my thinking. This stimulated many conversations (a big thank-you to those involved!), but I’ve had a constant battle with myself, trying to be enthusiastic but not dogmatic. Most recently I realised, in discussion with two friends of a more conservative persuasion, that I was slipping again <sup>[77]</sup>. I had to go back and moderate some earlier writings, especially <sup>[60]</sup>, titled ‘Bloody hell’(!) and my summary article <sup>[70]</sup>.

I still feel very passionate about God, but in one sense I feel *less* sure about what I believe. It’s that I feel more strongly than ever about the core of my faith – the creeds, as set up by the early centuries of the church – but I’m more willing to accept that different Christians have different views about various faith issues, and that’s fine. After all, this is God we’re taking about, so we can’t **know** everything about God. Instead, we love and trust God, and are confident (faith-ful) enough in that relationship to question things and to admit sometimes that ‘I don’t know’.

Finally, a couple thoughts that have occurred to me recently:

– Could it be that the sin of Adam and Eve was dogmatism? That is, rather than simply trusting God, they wanted to really know! ‘For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ Although God had said, ‘If you eat ... you will surely die’, they weren’t prepared to trust what God was saying; they wanted to *know*.

– Could dogmatism actually be a form of idolatry? Worship is partly about deciding what is the most important thing. While I may have always *said* that God is the most important, in practice what I got most excited about was my latest theological views. (Indeed, is that what I’m doing now? Obviously, I don’t think so; I think rather that I’m trying to challenge those theological views that seem to me to be standing in the way of people’s relationship with God.)

What do you think?

Blessings!

Paul Bev. 2.7.19

## 80 *The tree of life*

I’m definitely on a journey; I don’t know where that journey will take me, but I know I’m not alone. Yes, I have human companions, but the sense of God’s presence is wonderful.

On Tuesday morning, I finished my article <sup>[79]</sup> about (my) dogmatism, but when I had put it on my website, it somehow felt right not to send an email round to those people I alert when ‘the next exciting episode!’ is released.

On Tuesday evening, at our service of silence + compline, and Val shared a couple of scriptures. I haven’t a clue what the other one was because this one came to me so strongly:

Gen 2:9 *And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were [two trees!] the tree of life **and** the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*

I had always thought it was ‘the tree’, singular, that was the focus of Genesis 2 and 3, so later I followed this up and was again struck by what I read:

2:16. *And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”*

The implication there seemed to be “but you **can** eat from the tree of life”.

Then in Genesis 3 it all goes pear-shaped:

*1. Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” 2 The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, 3 but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree [‘the tree’, singular] that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”*

*22. And the LORD God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live for ever.” 23 So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken.*

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil brings death, but it looks as if the tree of life is, if you like, the antidote; it means we can live for ever.

Then there are four mentions in Proverbs, but they are about ‘a tree of life’, not ‘the tree of life’. Proverbs 3:18 has “She [wisdom] is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed.” Isn’t ‘wisdom’ supposed to be God personified? But the others seem to be about human activity, and in all four, ‘tree of life’ means something like ‘a source of good stuff’.

But **the** tree of life returns, of course, in Revelation:

2:7 *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*

22:1. *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.*

With my editor’s hat on, how can ‘the tree of life’, singular, be on ‘each side’?! Clearly, this isn’t a tree as we know it, but something much more glorious!

22:14 *Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.*

18,19 *I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.*

I got the sense that there is some gold to be dug here in the scriptures, between (1) the earth as created, (2) it all going pear-shaped, and (3) the new heaven and new earth. Exciting, but where do I start? But God knew ahead of time.

On Wednesday, I started reading Tom Wright’s *The Day the Revolution Began*, and I was rivetted. His thesis seems to be that the theological confusion of people like me, concerning the meaning of the cross, is as a result of not

seeing it in context of God's wider purpose, from Genesis to Revelation (eschatology), and he specifically mentions the tree of life in that context. (I suspect you'll be hearing more from me, via Tom Wright, in the coming days.)

So that's Tuesday and Wednesday; what happened on Thursday? I came here to Beccles so that Sue could set up an exhibition of her latest quilts. It's a joint exhibition with Jackie Smith, the lady who started the Christian quilting group, Sew Spiritual, and from whom Sue has learned so much over the past few years.

Jackie is exhibiting, for the first time, her series of seven very dramatic quilts based on Revelation. They have been 14 years in the conceiving and making, and they aren't just a pictorial representation of the images in Revelation. Rather, she has combined her love of trees with her close encounters with mental illness to interpret, rather than just represent, the themes of Revelation, using trees as the form of expression. (This doesn't do the slightest justice to Jackie's quilts, but Norwich folk can see them at St Peter's Ringland in August.)

And yes, that's right, you've guessed it, Jackie's quilts actually start from Genesis, using the exact same scriptures I 'discovered' on Tuesday; the whole series is focused on the tree of life.

I rest my case.

Paul Bev. 6.7.19

## 81 Christianity and Islam

As I said in starting my last article <sup>[80]</sup> 'I'm definitely on a journey', and the other day someone on our editors' discussion forum asked for an alternative expression to 'spiritual journey'. I responded by asking what sort of idea she was trying to express, and I continued by saying that I had lately been writing about my own spiritual journey and had used that very term x-number of times and just 'journey' (where 'spiritual' was implied) y-number of times.

This prompted a small exchange in which I gave the URL of my 'Thoughts' web page, following which I had a lovely email conversation with a Christian lady, whose thinking is going along similar lines to my own. I also have an ongoing discussion with a lady who said she wasn't a Christian but had read a couple of the articles and was pleased that people 'from the Abrahamic faiths' were willing to faithfully question (to use my expression, not hers) what we've always been taught.

One of her first comments, having said she was a Muslim, was that 'the Qur'an speaks of divine love and mercy more than it does of punishment' – and isn't that *exactly* what I've been saying about the Bible?! But I'd say that this is not the impression we have of Islam – those of us who have not actually read the Qur'an – and this parallels with people's attitudes to the Bible. How many people (even Christians!) are unaware that the Bible speaks more of divine love and mercy than it does of punishment?!

I'm still very much in enquiry mode where Islam is concerned, and this thought is definitely an 'I wonder' discussion starter, but I seem to see a pattern in humankind's relationship with the Divine. Let me explain.

This morning, I stumbled upon Romans 11 (I had taken my Gideon New Testament into 'the little room' and noticed that I'd randomly slipped a piece of paper into that page). I thought it didn't look a terribly fruitful passage and almost turned to something 'nicer', but every passage in the Bible is there to speak to us in whatever way God chooses, so I read it.

It seemed to be saying that God couldn't and wouldn't give up on the Jews – and isn't that what I've been seeing about the nature of God? What human parent gives up on their child ('Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!' Isaiah 49:15), so how much more will God not give up on his people, the Jews.

And getting back to the Qur'an, one of my prayer partners, Colin, told me that he had visited several Christian churches in Northern Cyprus that had been converted into mosques. In one, he got chatting to an imam, who

showed him a beautifully illustrated children's book about the Qur'an. The imam very kindly gave him a copy – it was written in English – so I borrowed it, to least start to fill the massive hole in my knowledge of the Muslim holy book.

It was fascinating, certainly, but when I mentioned it to my Muslim friend, she talked about 'such books' saying that 'We grew up embarrassed by their antiquated take on Islam.' My impression was that, while it repeatedly referred to Allah's great love for His people, the equally strong strand was about what you had to do to avoid displeasing Allah; certainly, obeying your parents formed something of a litany through the whole book.

Right, so where is all this leading my thinking? It has occurred to me is how easy it is for 'religion' to take over from relationship – as I might have mentioned before! Could it be that the One God keeps trying to bring us back? He certainly did so, right throughout the Old Testament.

Then in Jesus' time, the Pharisees had built up an atmosphere of punishment and exclusion of people who weren't holy enough. Jesus tried to convince people that God's plan had always been to provide forgiveness, to draw people back into relationship.

So, following my friend's comments about love and mercy in the Qur'an, could it be that, right from the start of Islam, God (Allah) was using the prophet Muhammed to try to bring people back into loving relationship? I gather that Muslims have the Injil (= Gospel = Good News), so maybe this was Allah's attempt to point people yet again in the right direction, back into loving relationship, but humans have allowed religion to take over from relationship.

Well, it's just a thought.

And as you know, I feel that the Reformation was another attempt by God to bring us back to focusing on the loving relationship shown in the Bible, so that we should come to God in trust (faith) not by doing things to please God (works). But there again, we've allowed religion to take over, and we've ended up with a prescriptive formula (penal substitution) by which we can determine who is out and who is in, and while we talk about God's love, the litany of this version of the gospel is that God needs to punish someone for sins committed.

And the other parallel I see is that both (modern?) Islam and modern Christianity, concentrate on earth as a temporary stage, preparing us for the real deal of 'heaven'. We say or imply that going to heaven will rescue us out of the mess we've created here. Where in the New Testament does it talk about 'going to heaven'?!

Through my reading of Tom Wright's book and the 'coincidence' <sup>[80]</sup> of my 'discovering' the tree of life, I'm realising again the importance of 'the kingdom', which was Jesus' constant theme ('Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'), and which we almost totally ignore as modern Christians.

(The sense of being led on this journey by God is amazing! Haven't I kept saying, in my articles, that 'the kingdom' was a theme which I would need to explore, but when I said that, I had no idea just how important it would prove to be. Exciting!)

Paul Bev. 24.7.19

## **82 A totally different view**

I've been quiet of late because I'm reading two Tom Wright books at the same time: *Surprised by Hope* and the more recent, *The Day the Revolution Began*, each of several hundred pages.

I started reading them because, as I've mentioned before, Jesus talked a lot about the kingdom, and yet it's a concept that I have not heard expounded much in the churches I have attended. How about you?



Tom Wright is saying that you can't properly understand the cross unless you see it in context with God's overall plan for humankind – Genesis to Revelation – and that is what I think God was pointing me towards through the amazing 'coincidences' of the three days that I mentioned in The tree of life <sup>[80]</sup>.

This morning I continued reading Revelation, and 5:10 stood out in flashing lights, how the people purchased by Jesus' blood "will **reign** on the **earth**". God's overall plan is not to rescue people **out** of this evil place, and take us to a lovely heaven, somewhere, but rather to restore things to what God always, always intended: for us to worship God (priests) and rule (kings) **on the earth**. (If you can find scriptures talking about 'going (up) to heaven' and 'going (down) to hell', do let me know – I don't see it that way anymore.)

This idea of our ruling and reigning has given me a totally different view of my vocation and calling in life. I'm not here to tell as many individuals as possible how they can be 'saved', but rather to somehow establish God's kingdom on earth, here and now (in anticipation of the glorious future we are promised). "Yes, but what does that actually mean in practical terms?!" I don't know, but I suspect that finding out is the next stage on my long and tortuous journey.

How I praise God for leading me on!

Paul Bev. 16.8.19

Maybe this passage from the 'Revolution' book will help:

### **Called to the Royal Priesthood**

I am suggesting that, in the Bible, humans are created in order to live as worshipping stewards within God's heaven-and-earth reality, rather than as beings who, by moral perfection, qualify to leave "earth" and go to "heaven" instead. This vision of the human vocation comes into focus in the book of Revelation:

Glory to the one who loved us, and freed us  
from our sins by his blood, and made us a  
kingdom, priests to his God and father—glory  
and power be to him forever and ever. Amen.  
(1:5–6)

You are worthy to take the scroll;  
You are worthy to open its seals;  
For you were slaughtered and with your own blood  
You purchased a people for God,  
From every tribe and tongue,  
From every people and nation,  
And made them a kingdom and priests to our God  
And they will reign on the earth. (5:9–10)

Blessed and holy is the one who has a share  
in the first resurrection! The second death has  
no power over them. They will be priests to  
God and the Messiah, and they will reign  
with him for a thousand years. (20:6)

The third passage repeats the vocation ('royal priesthood'), but not the means by which it is achieved (the Messiah's death); but the first two are quite clear. The death of Jesus, 'freeing us from our sins' and 'purchasing a people for God', was not simply aimed at rescuing humans from 'hell', so that they could go to 'heaven' instead, which is the picture most Christians have when they think about Jesus' death.

The great scene at the end of the book is the joining together of the 'new heavens and new earth'. Being there in the presence of God and the Lamb will give back to the redeemed the role marked out for them from the beginning in

Genesis and reaffirmed as Israel's vocation in the book of Exodus. There God promises his newly rescued people that they will be his 'treasured possession', 'a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' (19:5–6). The priestly vocation consists of summing up the praises of creation before the Creator; the royal vocation, in turn, means reflecting God's wisdom and justice into the world. This is a direct outworking of Genesis 1:26–28, where humans are created in the divine image. The book of Revelation picks up this theme exactly where Israel's scriptures left off. It says—shockingly, of course—that the ancient vocation had been renewed in a new and revolutionary way through the death of the Messiah. Once we get the goal right (the new creation, not just “heaven”) and the human problem properly diagnosed (idolatry [I mentioned this idea of sin being idolatry in <sup>[79]</sup>] and the corruption of vocation [i.e. not being kings and priests, as we should], not just ‘sin’), the larger biblical vision of Jesus' death begins to come into view.

A short aside may be needed at this point. Some readers may feel anxious about both elements of the vocation I am describing, the ‘royal’ bit and the ‘priestly’ bit. Let me say a word about each.

For many people, not least those who got rid of monarchs in the eighteenth century, the very idea of kings or queens seems outdated, antiquated, unnecessary, and quite possibly abusive. People often ask me why I continue to talk about the ‘kingdom of God’ when kingdoms in general have been such a disaster, making a few people rich and proud and a great many people poor and downtrodden. My normal answer is that things were like that in the first century too, if anything worse (think of Herod; think of Caesar!), but that Jesus went on talking about God becoming king anyway. Why did he do that? Answer: Because the perversion of human rule is just that, a perversion. We ought not to let the perversion rob us of the good news; and the good news is not only that God is sorting out the world, but that his rule is a different kind of rule entirely, from those that give monarchs a bad name. Prophetic passages such as Isaiah 11 and psalms such as Psalm 72 demonstrate that when God is faced with the corruption of monarchy, he promises not to abolish monarchy, but to send a true king to rule with utter justice, making the poor and needy his constant priority. The human vocation to share that role, that task, is framed within the true justice and mercy of God himself.

So too with ‘priesthood’. This word makes many people think of corrupt hierarchies, organizing ‘religion’ for their own purposes and threatening dire, and indeed ‘divine’, punishments for any who step out of line. Again, the abuse does not invalidate the proper use. The notion of priesthood, admittedly now often exposed as a cloak for selfish wrongdoing, is another vital part of being human. We humans are called to stand at the intersection of heaven and earth, holding together in our hearts, our praises, and our urgent intercessions the loving wisdom of the creator God and the terrible torments of his battered world. The Bible knows perfectly well that this priestly vocation can be corrupted and often has been. But once more it proposes not abolition, but full and complete cleansing. The Coming One ‘will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to YHWH in righteousness’ (Mal. 3:3). This ancient Jewish promise points ahead to the ultimate ‘priesthood’ of Jesus himself.

We should not be surprised, then, that horrible abuses have spoiled our sense of both the royal and the priestly vocations. That is what we should expect. The remarkable thing is that the Creator, having made the world to work in this way—with humans functioning like the ‘image’ in a temple, standing between heaven and earth and acting on behalf of each in relation to the other—has not abandoned the project. Yes, it gets distorted again and again. But it remains the way the world was supposed to work—and the way in which, through the gospel, it will work once more. The powers that have stolen the worshipping hearts of the world and that have in consequence usurped the human rule over the world would like nothing better than for humans to think only of escaping the world rather than taking back their priestly and royal vocations.

*The Day the Revolution Began*, chapter 4, pp 94-98(?)

## **83 A paradigm shift**

It's virtually three months since my last main article (<sup>[81]</sup> Christianity and Islam, 24/7), and that's after writing almost 100,000 words in 12 months. (I say ‘main article’ because Article <sup>[82]</sup> (16/8) was little more than a quote from Tom Wright.)

After a second read-through of *Surprised by Hope* (but I'm still only 2/3 through his *The Day the Revolution Began*) I can see that my title 'A totally different view'<sup>[82]</sup> was apt; indeed, it now feels more like a paradigm shift.

In the past couple of days, I've looked back through those 100,000 words to see how my thinking has changed.

At first, I was full of excitement that I had (re-)discovered the Trinity – God **is** relationship. I had spent years – decades – trying to find out what was 'right', and then persuading others of 'the truth'. But that ended in spiritual bankruptcy after pulling out of the sect I somehow fell into.

Everything for me then became about relationship, and it was glorious. Here now was the 'answer': I really can have a relationship with the Living God. So that relationship was now what I had to 'sell' to other people (see: leopard, spots).

All good and true, and I flourished as I sought to develop that relationship, but the more I read, both of the Bible and of other people's views about the Bible, the more uneasy I became. Yes, the Trinity is there in and through Old and New Testaments, but 'having a personal relationship' simply wasn't what Jesus preached about; nor was it what the early church taught, as they 'turned the world upside down'.

I became more and more convinced that 'the kingdom' (whatever that means) was at the heart of Jesus' teaching and preaching, and the early church followed his lead.

I challenged you folks (assuming that anyone was actually reading what I wrote) to tell me where in the New Testament we learn about 'going to heaven' (and thus avoid 'going to hell').. No-one responded, despite the fact that this way of seeing our faith is so **totally** ingrained in us – it's 'what we've always been taught'.

'The gospel' to us is about how Jesus died on the cross to take our personal sins upon himself, so that we can have new life and can, finally, go to heaven. Am I right, or do you see your faith in a different way? When did you last hear a sermon about the kingdom of God?!

The heaven/hell dichotomy is the core of our belief, is it not? That's how we think, so when we (well, the theologians among us) translate the Bible, we do so 'knowing' that this is what the Bible teaches, so our translations confirm our belief.

So now, the reason for my three-month gap is that I've been trying to follow Tom Wright as he explains the culture and the expectations and the understanding of the first century Jewish people, the culture within which Jesus came to explain that 'the kingdom of God is here'.

I'm not going to try to sum it all up in my few words, but let me try to at least share some of the various strands of what I think are involved in 'the kingdom'.

- the resurrection and ascension are key to understanding the NT church's revolutionary ideas
- the resurrection isn't just 'proof that Jesus' death on the cross really does bring forgiveness'
- in Jesus' resurrection, evil is defeated and the kingdom has come (begun?)
- when we die, we go to 'be with Christ', prior to returning to earth at 'the resurrection'
- Jesus' resurrection body was the first fruits, the forerunner, of what we will be
- our ultimate future is a restored, renewed, recreated world, where we will walk with God
- heaven will come to earth (Rev 20, 21), and we'll work together here with one another
- because the earth will be made perfect, we should be committed to doing what we can **now**

- feeding the hungry, releasing the captives, etc., is part of ‘thy kingdom come’
- evil will not be allowed to continue, and there will be some sort of judgement
- God’s concern is judgement as restoration (but I can’t go with universalism)

These are only some of the many aspects of ‘the kingdom’ that is developing in my mind.

But as I see it, the unbiblical idea of ‘going to heaven’ when we die makes us think in terms of escaping from this awful evil-filled, hell-filled place to a glorious place of joy and happiness. In which case, there’s little or no motivation to fight injustice (the biggest of which, Wright suggests, is the intolerable global debt that is keeping the poor countries poor).

Penal substitution has been my whipping boy, but I now feel that it is just the outward manifestation of a deeper misunderstanding of what Jesus taught. I certainly don’t have ‘the answer’, but reading the Bible through the lens of ‘the kingdom’ seems to make much more sense of many of the difficult passages – though the difficulties don’t vanish, of course!

Even Tom Wright’s *Surprised by Hope* isn’t an easy read; you’ll need your Bible alongside you all the time, if you’re to really do justice to his ideas and check them out, but if any of you do read it, please let me know what you think. Well, let me know what you think, anyway!

Blessings,

Paul Bev. 19.10.19

## **84 Let’s start a revolution!**

On and off over the many years, I’ve felt the huge contrast between the early church and how it spread and (what I see of) the church today.

In the past few days, I’ve felt it not so much a huge contrast, but a total disconnect. Here’s what has struck me...

Historical fact: In the name of Christianity, some terrible evil has been perpetrated, e.g. the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition.

Historical fact: Christians have been (and still are being) a massive force for good, e.g. the abolition of slavery, the fall of Apartheid + the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Mother Theresa, the fight against human trafficking.

Historical fact: After the resurrection, a movement started that ‘turned the world upside down’. It caused such a storm that many Christians were killed for their faith.

Idea: Based on my first 82 articles, let’s start a revolution! Let’s tell people that by believing in Jesus’ death for them on the cross, they can enter a wonderful personal relationship with God.

Do you see what I mean about a disconnect?

Looking back over my articles, I can see a trajectory: having been drawn back into a wonderful relationship with God, the theme of the kingdom has kept nagging at me.

This came to a head in <sup>[75]</sup> ‘What is the kingdom of God like?’: Jesus came as the expected Messiah and started a movement, which turned the world upside down in a matter of years, but then we turned it back into a religion. Why?

So if Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom, what does that mean? What did he and the early church mean by the kingdom? How could we, how dare we, turn it into the gospel of personal salvation and how I get to heaven?!

Once again, no answers, just exasperated questions. How do we escape religion and get back to a movement? How do we grow the kingdom?

‘Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth...’

Paul Bev. 28.10.19

## 85 Heaven and earth

We’re all different in the ways we learn and the ways we picture things and understand things, and, as you may have noticed, I’m a words and diagrams sort of person.

I’ve been struggling of late with the idea of ‘going to heaven’. I’ve been brought up to believe that there are two places – earth, where we are now, and heaven where we will be when we die – well, three places, I guess, the third place to be studiously avoided!

Yes, the Bible talks about heaven (and hell), but it doesn’t talk about our ‘going to heaven’ – rather, it talks about heaven coming to earth, and today, through Tom Wright’s *Surprised by Hope*, I’ve found a picture/diagram that I can relate to – big time.

Yes, gloriously and ultimately, heaven will come to earth, on Jesus’ return, but what about now? And what happened 2000 years ago?

Birth: Heaven came to earth in a single cell, which multiplied inside Mary

Death: Heaven came to earth to conquer death, once and for all

(‘descended into hell’ – did heaven go to hell, as well, maybe?)

Resurrection: Heaven came to earth in a glorious resurrection body

Ascension: Jesus’ physical resurrection body became no longer visible on earth

Pentecost: Heaven broke into earth in a massive way, through every believer

These are just raw ideas, coming out of my finger ends as I type, but the picture I’m getting is that heaven and earth (and hell?) are being stitched together, starting with Jesus.

Now, every single Christian believer is a stitch joining heaven and earth (and hell?), through which the wonder and glory and joy and redeeming and renewal and restoration and healing (and how long have you got to list it all?!) flows out into the earth.

Little wonder that the early church turned the world upside down!

And I now can’t wait to study the scriptures some more – this way of looking at things has massive implications, I think, for my whole way of looking at life.

‘Thy kingdom come, thy will be done **on earth...**’

Paul Bev. 31.10.19

## ***86 What should the Church be like?***

Today, a friend shared with me the following quote from *Re-enchanting Christianity*, by Dave Tomlinson (Canterbury Press, 2008).

Page 111: “The Church is by definition an inclusive community, because at its centre is the inclusive God whose love is manifest in the one who hung on a cross with arms outstretched. Church is not supposed to be a place of theological ‘purity’, or rigid conformity to certain beliefs and conventions, but a mishmash of believers, doubters, dissenters and malcontents, each of whom is grappling in his or her own way towards the mystery that is God. The Church is a place of refuge and hope, a place of prayer and laughter, a place of dreams and fresh imaginings, a place of birth and rebirth, a place of thought and theology, a place of weddings and funerals, a place where proud mums and dads bring tiny people to offer them to God, a place of parties, a place of bread and wine shared, a place of affirmation, a place of new beginnings, a place of freedom and generosity, a place of friendship, support and healing, a place of creativity, a place of reconciliation, a place of faith and doubt, a place where people can belong without necessarily knowing how or what to believe.”

No, it’s not saying ‘it doesn’t matter what you believe’, but it says to people ‘you belong even if you don’t believe exactly what I believe’. After all, it’s God we’re talking about, so who can say exactly ‘what God is like’?

I’ve just ordered a copy of the book!

Paul Bev. 1.11.19

## ***87 View from a drone***

This is going to be a rather self-focused article, but please bear with me; I believe I have some important questions to ask here.

I recently visited Toronto in order to give a talk about ‘macros’, the computer programs that I write for editors and proofreaders. In my preparations, I looked back, over the years, at my use of computer programs for editing text, and it made me realise how amazingly God set me up (as I see it) to become a ‘world expert’ in my (minute!) field.

When I first started using Microsoft Word for editing, 14 years ago, I had already been editing text by using computer programs for 18 years on Acorn computers, and I just assumed that this was ‘what one did’ in Word, but I soon found that virtually no-one in the proofreading and editing world had done this kind of thing.

The other factor was that we were heavily in debt, so I needed to earn money fast! I was therefore set up with both the skills and the motivation to develop, over those 14 years, a massive bank of computer programs (now over 700). My earning rate grew steadily so that now, with my pension income, I don’t need to do much paid work and so I have a lot of disposable time (which is partly why I’ve been able to spend so much time in Bible study, reading books and writing articles).

On the work front, as well as developing macros, I have created a range of YouTube training videos, my hope and prayer being that people will see this all as a witness. To celebrate my 100th video, I recorded ‘The Making of a Macro Maniac’, explaining my history with computer-based text editing. But I also explained how various of the

flaws in my character – including my being an obsessive-compulsive problem-solver – have been redeemed to produce something that is hopefully useful to other people (my macros and videos).

But to show that I don't take myself too seriously, at the end of the video I demonstrate how to take a satsuma and peel and segment it, and cut all the segments in half in under 20 seconds. (It's at about 11 minutes into the video, if you want to know my secret!)

So what? Well, if you feel minded to pray for me in my international witness, that would be great, but please be encouraged at how God uses people's shortcomings to bring blessing to others. (My YouTube channel now has almost 600 subscribers in more than 40 countries.)

To get back to my title, the drone is just one of the new technologies that has allowed archaeological investigations (my latest passion!) to reveal things about a potential site that might otherwise not be spotted. By taking an aerial view of the site, we can see patterns that aren't obvious at ground level.

But that's just an illustration (it makes a change from the 'looking at a tapestry with a magnifying glass' one): it says that taking the big picture is sometimes very helpful. Actually, I've recently been doing this with Romans, reading several chapters at a sitting, trying not to get distracted by the minutiae, and it has been *really* revealing. But that's for another day!

As with my work life, I've recently been looking back at my spiritual journey and I stand in awe at how God has been at work, seeing how far I have come – or so I hope and believe. Here's how I see it from a drone's eye view, in bullet points:

#### My initial unhappinesses

- the gospel as a mechanism (shouldn't it be a relationship?)
- prayer as a shopping list (shouldn't it be part of a relationship?)
- feeling embarrassed at British imperialism over the centuries, both politically and religiously
- the prevailing attitude of Christians (me!) towards homosexuals and homosexuality

#### My attitudes

- Christianity is right (therefore all other religions are wrong)
- my job in life is to persuade other people of the rightness of my (Christian) views

#### My trajectory

- the 'I'm right' syndrome came to a head through being in a tiny sect
- left the sect, but then 'what *do* I believe? Does God even exist?!'
- rebuilt a sort-of-Christian faith
- 'discovered' the Trinity (so I was right about relationship after all!)
- (coming from a dysfunctional family, I think I discovered love again)
- reverted to type and tried to persuade everyone that the Trinity was 'the answer' (Doh!)

#### My continued questioning

- what about all the 'nasty stuff' in the OT?!
- still really struggling with (intercessory) prayer  
(but learned the joy of silent prayer + the importance of the Lord's prayer)
- what do I believe about hell?
- what would Jesus say today about homosexuality?

Once again, more questions than answers, but I know from discussions I've had with some of you that I'm not alone.

## 88 “The Bible clearly teaches...”

I’ve recently realised <sup>[87]</sup> what a very privileged position God has given me in terms of my work life, and this in turn has enabled me to spend swathes of time thinking through many faith issues.

(In terms of time, multiply 88 articles by the time it took to write each one, let alone the time in reading books and studying the Bible that many of them represent, and that has all been since September last year. Please pray for me – I know that some of you already do – that this will not be a complete waste of my time and yours.)

All this is not (as I used to think) about finding the ‘right answer’, rather it’s about being willing to think, study and pray about some of the difficult issues of faith in the 21st century. If we don’t, then we won’t be able to reach people who currently think that the church is at best a laughing stock. (I have in mind the now 25 spouses of believers on my prayer list, plus my own family.)

As I said last time, I still have a number of weighty issues I’m considering.

- What about all the ‘nasty stuff’ in the OT?!
- I’m still really struggling with (intercessory) prayer (but have learned the joy of silent prayer + the importance of the Lord’s prayer)
- What do I believe about hell?
- What would Jesus say today about homosexuality?

But it’s OK, because...

- “The Bible clearly teaches...” that the world was created in seven days.
- “The Bible clearly teaches...” that the sun revolves around the earth.
- “The Bible clearly teaches...” that we should stone adulterers.
- “The Bible clearly teaches...” that those who deceive church leaders should die (Acts 5).
- “The Bible clearly teaches...” that slavery is right and proper.
- “The Bible clearly teaches...” that slavery is wrong and deplorable.
- “The Bible clearly teaches...” that corporal punishment of children is right and proper.
- “The Bible clearly teaches...” that masturbation is a sin.
- “The Bible clearly teaches...” that homosexual acts are a sin.

You see the problem!

After the work I’ve done in rebuilding my faith these past few years, I have a higher confidence in the (God of the) Bible than ever, but as I’ve mentioned more than once, the Bible doesn’t “clearly teach” anything; it has to be interpreted by us, fallible humans.

As Augustine of Hippo (354–430) says (no, I haven’t been reading him; this is someone else’s quote that I’m pinching...)

Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world... [and about a load of other observable facts]... Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for a non-believer to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn.

Paul Bev. 30.11.19

## 89 View from a drone 2



(I've already drafted 'View from a drone 3', and I'm amused by the double entendre I've created: 'drone'! But what I mean is that it's helpful to take the big picture, to see what God is doing.)

I've recently realised <sup>[87]</sup> what a very privileged position God has put me in, work-wise, but I believe that God has also led me on a journey in my personal life, especially in the past couple of years, and I can now see some parallels.

In my video 'The making of a macro maniac' ([https://youtu.be/Q8jRkp\\_7sb0](https://youtu.be/Q8jRkp_7sb0)) I explain how I have (at least!) three character faults: being an obsessive-compulsive problem-solver, being a terrible show-off, and being devious. (The last probably comes from my dysfunctional family upbringing, where I was clever at manipulating a situation to get to my desired goal.) But I mentioned in the video that those flaws have been redeemed (I stopped short of saying 'by God'!) to put me in a privileged position where I can generate computer tools that people really value.

But today, my drone's eye view is on my personal life, and it shows someone who has always been somewhat dogmatic – a very difficult fault to redeem, as you'll have noticed if you've been following my journey these past two years. For example, when I 'discovered' the Trinity – God as relationship – I immediately set about convincing you of this wonderful truth. And what am I now doing in my writings? Trying to convince you of the latest idea that I've just discovered!

You see the problem I've got?!

But to be fair to myself, it is a really difficult fault to avoid, isn't it? We're Christians, right? And we've been given the Bible – what a precious gift! The Bible gives us the truth – the absolute truth about God. And it's desperately important to everyone on the planet, right? And it's our responsibility to tell people – if we don't tell them, who will?! We don't want people to go to hell, which they will if they don't believe in Jesus and accept him as their personal saviour.

You see the problem we've got?!

Allied to that is our need to be salt and light in society. Think how many ways in which society is going wrong; it's moving away from God's plan for how humans should live. And it's our responsibility to tell people – if we don't tell them where they are going wrong, who will?!

You see the problem we've got?!

And another line of thought that I've probably mentioned more than once is the media's view of Christians. If you're watching a murder mystery (which Sue and I do quite a lot), as soon as a character appears who is a Christian, you know that they aren't going to be "a nice helpful person who loves other people and will do anything for anyone", but rather they are probably bigoted and judgemental... and it's probably them that did the murder!

You see our problem.

But on a more positive note, the other thing you'll probably have picked up about me is my growing concern for unsaved partners: people (95% women) who go to church but whose partners can't or won't come – not often, anyway. I currently have 25 couples on my prayer list. What is God saying to me? to us? How can we witness to them? But because they know us well (too well?), they'll know if we're being dogmatic.

You see my problem.

OK, I'll come clean. In what I've written above, I'm deliberately trying to lead you down a wrong track – exaggerating for effect.

In all of the above, I'm effectively leaving God out of the picture – it's all down to me (us). If *we* don't tell people, persuade people, witness to people, they'll go to hell.

Yes, we're called to be witnesses – to the very ends of the earth – but it doesn't *depend* on us. God is far more concerned about my unsaved friends and relatives than I am, and God is far more concerned about some of the terrible things happening in the world than I am.

As Paul says in Romans (which I hope to get on to, but keep getting distracted!), 1:17 *For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by **faith from first to last**, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."*

Live by faith, trust in your relationship with your loving heavenly Father, trust God to work in and through you. If you allow yourself to be led by fear and by guilt, it can so easily lead to dogmatism. Trust me, I've had 50 years of experience!

So don't let your life be dominated by fear (for unsaved loved ones – check out 1 Cor 7:14) or guilt (for not speaking out, for not 'preaching the gospel'). Instead, rejoice in God's love (for you, for your loved ones, for 'God so loved the world') for *There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.* 1 Jn 4:18.

Paul Bev. 1.12.19

## **90 View from a drone 3 – Preparing for take-off**

In the past few months, I've had a growing leaning towards the book of Romans – I think it may contain some pointers for the next stage of my journey, but I sense this means that I need to fly a drone above it, to try to take in the bigger picture, and see what Romans is really all about.

But those of us who have been Christians for many years already know what Romans is all about. In it, Paul wonderfully gives us a systematic view of the breadth of the **whole gospel** – the life of righteousness, through faith in the Son, lived in the Spirit. And as we gaze on this glorious range of mountains, we can point out the peaks: Romans 1, 3, 5, 8 and 12.

(Fun challenge: Can you bring to mind a single verse from any of the other eleven chapters?)

But we are right: Paul starts with his ringing declaration that **faith in the gospel** is absolutely central. Or do I mean 'in the gospel, faith is absolutely central'? Probably both.

*I am not ashamed of **the gospel**, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a **righteousness** from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by **faith from first to last**, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." 1:16,17.*

As Bible-believing Christians, our desire is to let Paul to teach us what the gospel is, so we need to view it afresh and avoid imposing our own view on it. But that's actually very difficult. I think it's as difficult as getting a Mac owner to see the good points of a Windows PC, or vice versa!

We all know 'what we've always been taught', which is something along the lines of: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 1 and 3), which means that we are excluded from God's presence, chained by our sin, but Jesus dies in our place to pay the penalty that we deserve (Rom 5 – "in Adam all die") so that we can be set free (Rom 5) and have a wonderful new life in God's presence through the Holy Spirit (Rom 8), and as those who are "saved from God's wrath" we need to grow in discipleship (Rom 12).

In case you've only started reading my articles recently, this view of the gospel is called penal substitution. At first, I explained in my articles how I thought this idea was just plain wrong, but gradually I have mellowed (became less dogmatic!) and now see it as one possible view. However, it has become something of a thorny issue, with some churches saying they think that penal substitution should be 'the centre of [a church leader's] theology and ministry'.

I've now come to feel that, while it's a valid view, penal substitution is just one way of looking at the glorious gospel. But for many people, especially in the 21st century, it's not the most helpful view, so my hope and prayer, as we look at the Roman mountain chain, is to find ways that people (such as my 25 spouses) can appreciate its true beauty.

When I went to Canada for my 70th birthday treat, I stayed with my dear college friend, Martin. His house is on the beach on the 'inside' of Vancouver island, so he looks back across the sound to the mountains of the mainland. Because the air is so clear, and you can see for so many miles, as you look at the distant mountains, every day the view is different – just glorious.

So let's get into that drone and fly above those five peaks of the Roman mountain chain, and check out the view from above, so that we can also see into the valleys. In particular, we need to view the range not in terms of how it looks in 2019, but in terms of how it looked in the first century, to the first readers, in Rome – we need a time-travelling tardis rather than a drone.

Thank you all for your prayers and your patience with me!

Paul Bev. 5.12.19

## 91 Our father – the kingdom prayer

Imagine my excitement when our post-Alpha group decided to study the Lord's prayer, which has become so important to me this past year or so. I was off to Amazon and ordered three books, none of which had arrived by the time we tackled, 'Our Father in heaven...'

We had a lively discussion, during which I animatedly pointed out how wonderfully revolutionary this was for Jesus' first disciples: He was actually telling them to address God as 'Father', as he himself did. And Jesus used 'Abba', the intimate child-like way of addressing God. This would have been scandalous to the Jews of the day!

Then the first of the three books arrived – *The Lord and His Prayer* by Tom Wright. I read excitedly through the Introduction and got stuck into Chapter 1 'Our Father in heaven', and then came to a juddering halt:

*People used to say that nobody before Jesus had called God 'Father'. They also used to say that the word Abba, which Jesus used in the Garden of Gethsemane ... was the little child's word, 'Daddy' in the Hebrew or Aramaic of his day. But...*

What?!

When I refound joy in my faith, almost three years ago now, it was by (re-)discovering the Trinity: I was drawn into that wonderful divine dance – yes, the Christian faith really *was* a relationship with a loving God, with the God who IS love.

But what is it about the Lord's prayer that has so struck me <sup>[06,20,29,42,74]</sup>? In <sup>[06]</sup>, I wrote:

*[Jesus] says "go into your room" ... How should we pray when we're on our own? "Our father..." and in all the rest of the Lord's prayer, there's not a single "I" or "me".*

So the Lord's prayer is about *us*, not about *me*. Where have I gone wrong (again)?!

My journey started as I reacted against the idea that the gospel is first and foremost about my personal salvation (penal substitution), and insisted that – as Jesus preached, and the early church preached – the gospel is about the coming of God's kingdom (on earth as it is in heaven).

But see how ingrained, imprinted I am! I just can't shake off the idea that the Christian faith is about 'me and my salvation', even if it became 'me and my relationship'.

What was it that spread out from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth? What was so revolutionary? Was it the news of personal salvation – or even that we can have a personal relationship? No, it was the coming of God's kingdom. Now *that* is something worth giving my life for!

Well, it is if I can work out what Jesus meant by 'the kingdom'!

Paul Bev. 11.12.19

## 92 *Sola fide* – by faith alone

As I was reminded yesterday, Paul Beverley can get things totally wrong – so easily, with the best of intentions. Multiply that up, and the church can get things spectacularly wrong in all sorts of ways, and being so big it can do some real damage – think Spanish Inquisition and Crusades.

But of course, when it gets it right, it can do massive good. I'm not a church historian, but I'm sure you can think of lots of examples.

And what about the Protestant Reformation, whose 600th anniversary we've just celebrated?

The church had become corrupt, structurally and theologically, and the reformers stood out against various aspects, one of which (I'm reading Romans, remember) produced the rallying cry, *sola fide* – justification by faith alone. (The Wikipedia definition is below.)

In <sup>[90]</sup>, as I was preparing to launch my drone up over the Roman mountain range, I pointed out that Paul said it was about 'a righteousness that is by faith from first to last' (1:17), so it's not surprising that Romans was a key element of *sola fide* (and Galatians, as was made clear when I Googled *sola fide* – see below).

So the Reformation brought us back to the important principle that salvation is by faith, not works, and when people start quoting verses from James about 'faith without works is dead' (Jas 2:17 etc), we bring in an important principle of biblical exegesis, 'let Scripture interpret Scripture'. In other words, if one verse or passage seems to contradict another, you use your knowledge of the vast sweep of Scripture and decide which bit is right and which is, perhaps, 'open to a different interpretation'.

(At this point, I'm tempted to mention <sup>[60]</sup>, where I quoted Jesus' words about how the 'goats' will be told '*Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*' and '*they will go away to eternal punishment*', and that the 'goats' are those who failed to care for the poor and marginalised... but I don't need to worry, because the vast sweep of Scripture will allow us to interpret Mt 25 in a different way.)

Every time I read John's Gospel, I'm amazed at how JWs can *possibly* say that Jesus didn't see himself as God incarnate – and yet in my experience, JWs really do take the Bible seriously. So as I said in <sup>[88]</sup> we have to be very careful with any 'the Bible clearly teaches' statements, because it can so easily be me interpreting the Bible to say what I want it to say, or 'what I've always been taught'.

So how can we avoid making such huge mistakes as the JWs make? Well, a good dose of humility might help. It took God to allow me to get into that tiny sect to teach me that knowing God isn't about 'being right'.

But the two principles I've tried to use in looking at Romans are first not to take verses out of context (remember how incandescent I got <sup>[52]</sup> when I looked at the context for 'the wages of sin is death?') and second to try to understand the first readers. The books were written for real people in a real situation, and what you say to someone to try to help them has to relate to 'where they are at'. So when we read a passage of Scripture 2000 years later, if we don't take the trouble to read it first as they read it, we risk getting things very wrong.

And I'm even daring to ask whether some of the theologians (I'm *not* a theologian) of the Reformation could possibly have got some of their interpretations of Scripture wrong.

I think what I'm saying today is that faith is about humbly interpreting Scripture and not about being right; worse still faith is not about *knowing* you're right, as I have done for almost 50 years!

Paul Bev. 12.12.19

### **Wikipedia**

**Sola fide**, also known as justification by faith alone, is a Christian theological doctrine commonly held to distinguish many Protestant churches from the Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches

**'Biblical answers' website** (my emphasis)

**Question:** Why is sola fide important?

**Answer:** Sola fide, which means 'faith alone,' is important because it is one of the distinguishing characteristics or key points that separate the true biblical Gospel from false gospels. **At stake is the very Gospel itself and it is therefore a matter of eternal life or death.** Getting the Gospel right is of such importance that the Apostle Paul would write in Galatians 1:9, "As we have already said, so now I say again: **If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!**" Paul was addressing the same question that sola fide addresses—on what basis is man declared by God to be justified? Is it by faith alone or by faith combined with works? Paul makes it clear in Galatians and Romans that man is 'justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law' (Galatians 2:16), and the rest of the Bible concurs.

## ***93 What do we learn from history?***

The answer, apparently, is that we never learn anything from history. However, as the proud owner of a grade 9 at O level history, I will now endeavour to help us to learn something from history (including my own personal history).

Let's start with the Reformation. What was the problem? Wasn't it partly clericalism? The church leaders were the ones who translated the Bible and interpreted it and told the people what God wanted – and the people lived in fear because they knew that if they didn't do what the church leaders said, they would go to hell.

As Google tells me "William Tyndale was burned alive in a small town in Belgium in 1536. His crime was to have translated the Bible into English." The church leaders were well-intentioned: Tyndale was a danger to the spiritual lives of the common people because if they read the Bible in English, they would misunderstand it, get the wrong idea and therefore might end up going to hell – so Tyndale had to die, to save the people from heresy.

I mentioned the JWs yesterday. Their leaders are really concerned that people should know the truth and that the truth should set them free, so they have their own translation, and they have very careful teaching sessions where they help their fellow JWs to understand what God requires, so that they can be among the 144,000 and not go to hell.

When I was in my sect, 'Harry' really loved us and cared for us all. But he would lead the Bible study and tell us what it meant – he was even gradually doing his own translation. But towards the end, before I pulled out, I well remember the fear that I felt, when my phone would ring. Harry would ring up, out of the blue, and say that there was going to be a Bible study that evening; I really felt I had to go or I would sense his disapproval.

How could an intelligent man like me be so stupid?! In my defence, he did have prophetic and healing gifts, of which I had first-hand experience. But as the group grew smaller, I still believed he had the right interpretation, and I really didn't want to lose my salvation.

And did you read the clip I found yesterday about sola fide? Here it is again (my emphasis):

Sola fide, which means ‘faith alone,’ is important because it is one of the distinguishing characteristics or key points that separate the **true biblical Gospel** from false gospels. **At stake is the very Gospel itself and it is therefore a matter of eternal life or death.** Getting the Gospel right is of such importance that the Apostle Paul would write in Galatians 1:9, ‘As we have already said, so now I say again: **If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!**’ Paul was addressing the same question that sola fide addresses—on what basis is man declared by God to be justified? Is it by faith alone or by faith combined with works? Paul makes it clear in Galatians and Romans that man is ‘justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law’ (Galatians 2:16), and the rest of the Bible concurs.

All the people I’m referring to here are, or were, well intentioned, and they can be wonderful loving people, but if they are causing us to live in fear of ‘getting it wrong’ then clearly we have not learned from history.

*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. (1 Jn 4:18,19)*

We do need to read the Bible for ourselves and not just accept what we’ve always been taught.

Paul Bev. 13.12.19

## 94 Sola fide II – more pre-flight checks

Here it is again – what I got when googled ‘sola fide’ (my emphasis):

Sola fide, which means ‘faith alone,’ is important because it is one of the distinguishing characteristics or key points that separate the **true biblical Gospel** from false gospels. **At stake is the very Gospel itself and it is therefore a matter of eternal life or death.** Getting the Gospel right is of such importance that the Apostle Paul would write in Galatians 1:9, ‘As we have already said, so now I say again: **If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!**’ Paul was addressing the same question that sola fide addresses—on what basis is man declared by God to be justified? Is it by faith alone or by faith combined with works? Paul makes it clear in Galatians and Romans that man is ‘justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law’ (Galatians 2:16), and the rest of the Bible concurs.

Then go back a step to the less confrontational Wikipedia definition:

**Sola fide**, also known as justification by faith alone, is a Christian theological doctrine commonly held to distinguish many Protestant churches from the Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches

And then back to what Paul says:

*I am not ashamed of **the gospel**, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a **righteousness** from God is revealed, a righteousness that is **by faith from first to last**, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”*

Rm 1:16,17.

What has God been trying to drum into Paul Beverley? ‘You stupid boy!’ (God has been saying, lovingly!) ‘It’s not about being right! It’s about trusting me, having faith, going on your journey into the unknown, with me beside you.’

And the other thing God has been saying to me – very strongly and from all sorts of aspects – is the importance of community, e.g. there's no 'I' in the Lord's prayer. 'You mustn't go on that journey alone; you may not entirely agree with the people around you, but you must accept one another for who you are.'

Can you see, therefore, why I find that first quote is so awful? First of all – and ironically – it's not actually about faith; it's about fear: get it wrong and you're in real trouble! Second it's about being right: there is only one 'true biblical Gospel' (i.e. the writer's interpretation of it). Third, that 'Gospel' is about how I, as an individual, can be saved: remember the 'gospel-based' website I quoted <sup>[6]</sup>: 'Leave everybody out of it; it's between you and God'.

Whether penal substitution is right or wrong is no longer an issue for me; if you find it a helpful way to look at what Jesus achieved on the cross then that's fine by me. But the view of the gospel that Romans gives us is so much bigger and more wonderful – panoramic, even; I can't wait to get the flight started! Maybe the drone will get to take off tomorrow.

Paul Bev. 14.12.19

## 95 Why is it so revolutionary?!

Both in thinking through the message of Romans and, for my post-Alpha group, thinking about the Lord's prayer (Tom Wright, 'The Lord and His prayer' is helping me hugely), I'm coming up with the same sort of thoughts:

Personal salvation (wonderful as it is) and even a personal relationship with God (the fantastic reality of which started me on this journey) will not 'turn the world upside down'.

Only the coming of the kingdom of God can (and did!) do that.

'Yes, yes, Paul, but we do believe in the kingdom of God. Jesus is king in my life.'

But have we any real clue what 'the kingdom' means? I certainly didn't. Could I tell you what 'kingdom' means? what it looks like? where it is? how I reach it? But 'the kingdom' was what Jesus talked about incessantly, i.e. it was what the early church (those who wrote the New Testament) recorded Jesus as saying.

So how the blazes *did* those few frightened disciples turn the world upside down?!

Obviously it wasn't by preaching for personal salvation, but maybe it was that their preaching was accompanied by 'signs following'? That's been a popular approach in the past few decades, and churches where miracles are seen to be taking place are, I'm sure, growing.

But why did things so totally explode in the first century?

What I'm feeling my way towards is that it's to do with 'at *just the right time*, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.' (Ro 5:6)

Why was it 'just the right time'? Because it was God's time. God had been working with the Jews for centuries, starting with the faith of Abraham – what a guy! We all know the pattern: the Jews faithfully worship God, then they begin to go astray; they are warned that if they don't focus on God it will all go horribly wrong; they think other things are more important than God (they give other things their worth-ship); and things do go horribly wrong – usually they end up in exile; then they turn back to God; so God rescues them; but once again they start to worth-ship other things (giving other things their worth-ship = idolatry: we still do it today, big time!).

So now, when Jesus comes on the scene, the Jews are in 'exile' (albeit in Israel), and they are desperate for another exodus; waiting for it, longing for it.

Have you ever seen that experiment where you dissolve crystals in hot water and then cool it down – nothing happens! But then you drop a single tiny crystal into the solution and... Bang!... a massive and beautiful network of crystals develops. That's my picture of 'just the right time'.

One of my favourite verses, i.e. which I can relate to most strongly, is: '*Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?*' Lk 24:32

In my stumbling way, I'm beginning to see more of what the kingdom is about (I have to say mainly due to Tom Wright), and why it's so fundamental, why the early church exploded. The kingdom is the fulfilment on earth of the pattern established through the Jews: our purpose in life is to live on earth, giving worship to God – and God alone, or it's not God we're worshipping.

For the early church it was because (as Jesus taught them) the kingdom came *on earth* (as in heaven) that (a) they made such a massive impact (b) they suffered – they shared in Jesus' suffering. 'The kingdom is among you now!' said Jesus. Yes, ultimately and wonderfully on the new earth, when heaven comes down to earth, but heaven on earth does start here and now. That's why it sometimes feels so wonderful, and sometimes life seems like hell on earth, but through the pain, we know that Jesus has triumphed over evil, and we're called to bring that triumph into real everyday situations now, insofar as we can.

That's a bit muddled, sorry, but that's how my thinking is going – maybe you can relate to this, maybe not. Can you see how it relates to the Lord's revolutionary prayer?

Throughout my Christian life, the 'wrong worship' has been trying to understand the Bible so that I can know what is RIGHT, know the right interpretation (and then convince others) – that has been my idolatry. And given the absolutely awful ways that churches have split and argued and split and argued again, I'm guessing that I'm not alone in the idolatry of thinking my interpretation of the Bible is RIGHT.

Paul Bev. 16.12.19

## 96 *Knowing right from wrong*

### *Disclaimer*

Despite having read quite a few theological books in the past couple of years I'm certainly not a theologian, so I'm not trying to tell anyone what to think. Indeed, as I've said repeatedly, thinking that 'I am right' has been a 'bad thing' in my life.

Rather, I'm openly expressing my thoughts about theological matters because (a) I find it helps me to think things through and (b) some of you have found occasional articles helpful.

So I'm bold today to mention something that has been 'bubbling under', and on which my views have changed, though for some it may be a step too far.

### *The meat of the matter*

While I've been disparaging about insisting on being right, we do have to make decisions for ourselves and, if things are not to descend into anarchy, make decisions for society. So how do we decide what's right and what's wrong?

Rather, how do we decide on the different types of right and wrong? (At this point, I wish I were a theologian because presumably they will be able to articulate this much better than I can.)

As I planned this article, I was hoping to say that when we ask whether something is wrong, we know that some things are fundamentally wrong – wrong in principle – and some things are more 'ethically wrong', and that the



answer to the question, 'Is this wrong?' may change over time, for whatever reason. But as I began writing, I realised it was more complicated than that.

Clearly, historically, our right/wrong answer on some issues has changed: what about slavery? or capital punishment? or corporal punishment? Society's views *have* changed on the first and *are* changing on the other two.

The question in my mind as I tried to frame this article from a Christian (Bible-based) perspective was: are some decisions 'just ethical', and are some things '*spiritually* fundamental'? I tried to apply this idea to the three issues above, and also to physically chastising children, Sunday observance, divorce, contraception ... and one other biggy that I'll come to in a minute.

This article is aimed at people who, like me, want to base their life-decisions on what God thinks, and who therefore look to the Bible for guidance. And you have to admit that 'our' views have changed over the years, decades, centuries. Why have they changed? Well, society has changed, and our knowledge about human beings has increased. Our growing understanding of how humans 'work' has, in cases such as physically chastising children, made us change our views.

So my question is how open am I, how open are we, to changing our minds in the light of increasing human understanding? I ask that because the main issue I have in mind is: Are we willing to think again about homosexual partnerships? (I've chosen that term carefully as I'm thinking about loving, committed, exclusive relationships.)

Some of you reading this may feel that 'homosexual activity' is simply a sin – non-negotiable. And you have come to that conclusion because you have thought through the Bible's teaching. So you would presumably work on the principle of 'love the sinner but hate the sin'. But I have to admit that I had, until recently, never even looked at the Bible's teaching: I just 'knew it was wrong' – obviously! But I started to change my mind when I looked at Romans 1: 26, 27 *in context*, and thought 'I wonder what other New Testament teaching there is on this?'

If you're willing to be challenged and to consider the biblical teaching and the scientific evidence then you could try Andrew Davison's book 'Amazing love'.

Paul Bev. 18.12.19

## ***97 First drone flight – what a view!***

After all the preparatory work, I have now taken my first flight up over the Romans mountain range. However, with the drone's limited battery life, I was only able to take in the first five chapters – but the overview was eye-opening, to say the least.

As we already know, Romans is about the gospel in its full expanse and wonder, and the gospel is all about faith: *For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'.* (1:17)

(I prefer to use the word 'trust' because it feels to me more personal – trust in a person. I feel 'faith' can be thought of in a more abstract sense, but I won't argue if you prefer 'faith'.)

If the gospel is all about trust, then what did I see as I looked down on Romans 1–5? What struck me was that it was all about attitude – our attitude to God and our attitude to other people.

From up above, you can see how ch. 1 and ch. 2 are all of a piece, linked by the 'You, therefore' of 2:1, and together it forms a scathing attack on the religiously self-righteous (RSR) who look down on 'those who do such things', i.e. the awful things that 'they' do, as listed in ch. 1.

So while the RSR are concentrating on the bad things (other) people do, Paul slams into them:

How *dare* you judge others! (2:1) That's a totally wrong attitude, which will bring God's wrath down on you (2:5). You think circumcision means you're 'in', but the 'true Jew' (2:29) is the one whose attitude is right.

Hang on though! Isn't chapter 1 is about God's wrath coming down on the ungodly! Actually no, not really. Looking back from God's very severe condemnation of the RSR in ch. 2, the wrath in ch. 1 looks a bit different to me. It seems to me to be saying that those who do *not* have the advantage of the Jews' knowledge of God can still see God in creation. However, if they have the wrong attitude (1:21ff), and don't respect what they *do* see of God, then God will 'give them over' (1:24,26,28). In other words, God allows them to choose the path down which their wrong attitudes will take them – and all sorts of nasty things happen as a result.

So in ch. 1, the wrath is the natural consequence of people's not acknowledging God and not being thankful (1:21), whereas in ch. 2 it's as if God is getting *really* cross with those who have been given a much more intimate knowledge of God, yet *still* have the wrong attitude. They are in a position of great privilege, and are misusing that privilege.

In ch. 1 and 2, Paul has contrasted the Jews and the Gentiles – those with and without privileged access to the knowledge of God (which we could perhaps bring up to date and apply to those brought up as Christians). But then in ch. 3 he points out that, in a way, there's really no difference (3:9ff), we're all under the power of sin because of our wrong attitude to God. And the solution is to trust in the trustworthiness of God. God says he will freely forgive us by his grace (3:24), so we have to believe what God says – attitude again.

Chapter 4 illustrates the importance of having an attitude of trust – Abraham is the supreme example of a trusting (faith-ful) person, and because Abraham trusted God he went off on his great adventure. It's not about *doing* something to please God – obeying the Law, for example, as that hadn't been invented then – rather, once again, it's about Abraham's attitude of trust in God.

Finally and gloriously, we see in ch. 5 how Adam had the wrong attitude to God whereas Jesus completely, fully and absolutely trusted God – even to death on the cross – and this gave him victory in life. So Jesus shines out as the example of how wonderfully we can live our lives within an attitude of total trust.

So that was my first flight, and now I'm hoping to get some bigger batteries, for a more sustained flight over some of the other chapters of Romans.

Actually, there was something else I noticed by using Lidar (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lidar>). It showed up a tiny detail in high relief (which is what Lidar can do *par excellence*). In the midst of these five chapters (138 verses) dedicated to the importance of *attitude* are two verses about *behaviour*: 1:26,27. From those, it appears that we can say that gay sex is a sin.

Having searched for other verses, the only cross references my Bible offers are to Leviticus, and using verses from Leviticus to guide us ethically is fraught with danger. (For a wicked but tellingly funny commentary on this, see <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2010/08/18/dr-laura-and-leviticus>.)

Wanting to know whether gay sex within a stable, loving, exclusive relationship could be counted as sinful, I looked further and found 1 Cor 6:9, 1 Tim 1:10 and +. In these, the Greek is translated as 'perversion', so in interpreting those verses, we have to decide what classes as 'perversion' or 'unnatural'.

But even if we disagree on the interpretation of those verses we must obviously continue to love one another. In my view, any feelings of fear or disgust towards other people are totally against the gospel (*mea culpa*). And to say that it's 'clearly sinful' is to be judgemental, because we'd be saying, 'we disagree on the interpretation, but you're wrong'.

It's ironic that the two main verses we have to interpret as regards homosexuality occur right in the middle of Paul's stinging condemnation of religious judgementalism.

The view from the drone has, as I say, been eye-opening to me!

## 98 Sensing what God is doing

As we approach 2020 and as I look back over the 18 months since I started ‘Rebuilding my faith’ in article <sup>[1]</sup>, it’s been hugely encouraging to see that I’m really not alone in my journeying. It feels as if a growing number of people are finding ways of expressing their faith that they can really be enthusiastic about and that they don’t feel embarrassed to share with their friends and family. Maybe God is moving in a new way? Certainly, I’m very excited by what has happened, is happening to me.

But is this journey taking me – taking us – off into error?! We need to travel carefully and not, as I fear I tended to do at first (sorry!), just chuck out the ‘old stuff’. In a recent discussion, a faithful friend told me of his concern, which I can quite understand: ‘*There is a danger of a sort of deconstruction that turns everything into a metaphor.*’

Now I’m of the generation that saw the rise of liberal theology, and we realised that, if we didn’t stand up to it, it would dilute the gospel, and we’d end up with a sort of wishy-washy Do-good-ianity. So I trust I’m not becoming ‘liberal’ in that sense – maybe ‘open’ is a better word?

Now I’m no church historian, but as I’ve thought about this, it seems that as Bible-believing Christians rightly stood out against this liberal theology, the downside (which I recognised in myself in my earlier article, ‘Full Circle’ <sup>[0]</sup>) was that we had swung too far. This brought polarisation, and we have ended up with a fundamentalist, literalist Christianity that was about being right, and I felt that my main job in life was to convince others of the truth of that rightness.

This unhelpful fundamentalist attitude is legitimised as ‘the Bible gives us the absolute truth’, failing to notice and/or point out that the Bible has to be translated and interpreted. So what is claimed to be ‘absolutely true’ is in fact just our particular church’s interpretation of the Bible.

Once I recognised this self-right-eousness in myself, I started to look around at what could replace it. I still remained convinced that it was the Bible that had what we needed to enable us to know God through Jesus, but I discovered that Jesus and the early church preached ‘the kingdom of God [heaven]’, and not just a mechanism by which I could be forgiven and have a personal relationship with God. The only definition of ‘the gospel’ that I could see in the Bible, and in the early church, was simply the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. And this was the basis of the kingdom of God, something that I now see as much deeper and broader, and more widely appreciable and understandable – and indeed revolutionary – than ‘personal salvation’.

But isn’t my friend’s concern amply illustrated here? I’m replacing the clear-cut, definite understanding of how Jesus died on the cross and took my sins upon himself with a very vague statement about the gospel being a story (where we hear ‘story’ as similar to fable or myth).

Quite the contrary! What Jesus did on the cross, in defeating the powers of evil is so dramatic and wonderful that it’s a huge mistake to limit our understanding and appreciation of it to one single metaphor. Ironically, penal substitution – which some churches equate to ‘the gospel’ – is itself a metaphor, just one of many glorious metaphors that help us to appreciate the wonder of the cross.

So I don’t think I’m becoming more liberal in my expressions of faith; rather, I’m trying to get away from the straightjacket that limits us to one ‘right’ understanding of the gospel. And I think I’m more able to express my faith in a way that will *not* immediately cause my friends and family to write it off.

This has come to a head for me over one specific issue: the church’s attitude to homosexuality. It’s been bubbling under for months, especially in my encounters with Romans, and this has finally brought it to the surface in <sup>[96]</sup> and <sup>[97]</sup>.

Early in my journeying, a Christian I love and respect said he thought that I was writing off a percentage of the Bible in order to make it acceptable to my own children. I don’t think I am, of course, but am I now writing off even more of the Bible’s teaching? As you will see from <sup>[96]</sup> and <sup>[97]</sup>, I now think that my former view about homosexuality was based on my personal prejudice – I had never actually studied the scriptures for myself.

Through my recent studies <sup>[96, 97]</sup>, I now believe that the Bible’s teaching on homosexuality is nowhere near as clear-cut as I used to think. We can discuss it, but being dogmatic is certainly not going to be helpful, to say the least. Indeed, I fear that my judgementalism is far more damaging to society and to people’s appreciation of the gospel than any ‘point of principle’ about homosexuality.

Why have we, as Christians, got so hung up about ‘sexual sin’?! And could it be that, in a sense, it’s Christians’ judgemental attitudes that have led to the reaction towards ‘free love’, and now to the commercialisation of sex? A big subject, not for now.

What I am hoping is that we can get away from finger-pointing attitudes and back to loving and accepting people as and where they are. Let’s celebrate life-long, loving relationships as being what God values most highly.

Paul Bev. 23.12.19

## ***99 Remember, Paul was a Pharisee***

You know, I think that Pharisees get a really bad press, and I do have a sneaking admiration for them. They recognised that God had called the Jews and given them a very special task: to set up God’s kingdom on earth – to bring the good news to **all the nations**:

*I will surely bless you, and I will multiply your descendants like the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore ... And through your offspring all nations of the earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice. Gen 22:7ff.*

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light ... For to us a child is born, ... And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ... **He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever.** Is 9:2ff*

They had studied their Bibles, and they knew the Messiah would come, and I think they were really concerned that when Messiah did come they should be really ready. So that they should living Godly lives, as (their) Bible taught them. But they did make one tiny mistake: they concentrated too much on the minutiae of how we should **behave**, and forgot the importance of their **attitude** to God and to one another.

To be fair, the Pharisees of Jesus' day weren't the first to make this mistake – the people of God had been doing it for centuries, over and over and over again. Thankfully too, God is very patient and forgiving. God allowed them ('given them over', Rom 1) to suffer the natural consequences of their wrong attitudes (usually captivity), but then rescued them and restored and redeemed and renewed them, and encouraged in them right attitudes: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc.

And I have a fellow feeling with the Pharisees because, as I've explained in my articles, I too was enthusiastic about the Bible and studied it, to make sure I, and others, got things right – and I've spent many a year explaining to others what they needed to do to get to heaven.

Paul (Saul), however, was a better Pharisee than me; he at least recognised that it wasn't about how I could (we could) 'get to heaven', but that we should be looking for a Messiah to set up his kingdom here on earth. But Paul's 'Damascus road experience' was to realise that the very person he saw as flouting many of God's laws (laws that Saul felt helped us to get close to God) was actually the One he'd been waiting for, to rescue, restore, redeem and renew, and to encourage the right attitudes: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc. No wonder he then got very excited.

I really do have a fellow feeling for Paul. I'm just cross that it has taken me almost 50 years as a Bible-believing Christian to see the folly of setting up a carefully crafted set of guidelines for 'what you have to do to become a Christian and get to heaven'.

I found a passage yesterday that sums it up for me:

*He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – **not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.** Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, ... will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that **condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!** 2 Cor 3:6–10.*

(And I don't believe that 'righteousness' here refers to right **behaviour!**)

Finally, I'd like to apply this passage to the thinking I've been doing about homosexuality. What is God's main concern? Obviously, I think it's rescuing, restoring, redeeming, renewing, and to encourage right attitudes: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control etc. But what does that look like when it comes to sexual issues?

I think our prime concern should not be particular sexual actions, but the attitudes of our hearts. My prime concern has to be my heart attitude which, I have to admit, has not been good. Without even bothering to study the Bible on the issue, I *knew, without any doubt*, that homosexual acts were wrong – the Bible clearly condemns them – so people who do such things need to repent. And we as Christians should stand up against those forces in our society that are saying such behaviour is acceptable. History shows that societies that allow such things tend to decay.

Maybe I never really articulated my thinking as clearly and strongly as that, but that's what was underneath my polite exterior.

Now let me try to articulate my current feelings on sexual issues. I think God is very unhappy when, sexually, we fail to have, for instance, love and patience and faithfulness and self-control. I think I can safely say that God hates it when women are exploited as sexual objects and when relationships break down for whatever reason and children get hurt and exploited and ... listen, I don't need to name all the damaging ways in which we treat each other – we can all list them, and sadly we can all see them in today's society.

Having now *actually* studied my Bible, I have failed to find any convincing proof that the private sexual activity of a loving couple is something that God feels strongly about. What I have found, following Romans 1:26,27, is Romans 2, where Paul condemns me for my judgemental attitudes, which are so corrosive to society. Indeed, **God** condemns me, but God will forgive me if I repent.

So what would Jesus do/think/say if he were alive today? Would he have gone on gay pride marches? Maybe, but I know for certain there would have been quite a number of gay people in Jesus' band of followers.

Is it a coincidence that until 2/3 years ago (i.e. in my 'I am right' days) I had never even knowingly spoken to a gay person? Whatever, God has recently changed that situation, to my real delight and joy. My world is becoming a more wonderful place day by day.

Paul Bev. 26.12.19

## **100 Homosexuality – A real problem**

The issue of homosexuality has gradually been creeping up on me. First, it was a lady in our homegroup at our previous church who told us she was going to get married. She was clearly very much in love but it can't have been easy for her, as a prominent member of the church.

More recently, through my work, I've met a lovely gay couple, let's call them Aaron and Brian, to add to, say, Carol and Denise. So let's talk about these four people and our attitude to them.

You see, for me it's no longer a theoretical discussion – it's a real problem. C & D are churchgoers and they have had to find a church in the town where they now live. And suppose I get chatting to A & B, and they show an interest in the Christian faith, what's going to happen?

Suppose you see me and Sue in church with A & B of one side and C & D on the other; what's going through your mind?

Maybe your view is that the Bible teaches that gay sexual activity is sinful – a perversion, even. And maybe you think that our liberal society is sweeping aside God's standards.

And suppose you are also worried that society's current attitudes to sexuality are going to negatively impact our children. How does that affect your view of A, B, C & D?

It's been a journey for me; indeed, the journey is very much continuing. A few years ago, my theological views would have been those I've just expressed; now, I'm not so convinced that the biblical warrant is that strong, based on just four verses: Rom 1:26,27, 1 Cor 6:9, 1 Tim 1:10.

In any case, what is *really* important? What do Paul and others stress? What is *really* corrosive in our society? What would Paul rail against if he were alive today? How would he view gay sex within a loving, stable relationship? I don't know, but I'm pretty convinced that his stress would be on our attitudes to one another – that's what makes or breaks society. What's my biblical evidence for that? It's that Rom 1:26,27 is followed by Romans 2.

And that's another thing I've learnt strongly during my journey: if someone quotes one or two verses to support their view, check the context.

Happy New Year!

Paul Bev. 28.12.19

[Can I stop, please, now that I've reached 100?!]

## 101 Homosexuality – the jury's out

Last time, I took a personal approach, and thought about our attitudes to our gay brothers and sisters, but today I want to take a more impersonal approach: I'm putting *homosexual action* in the dock and saying, 'Members of the jury, how do you find the defendant?'

But I'm taking it as read that sexual actions – whether gay or straight – that are non-consensual or the result of unfaithfulness are damaging to human relationships and are therefore wrong. So we're only talking here about sexual actions within the context of a *loving and committed relationship*.

The first question in this trial is who should be allowed on the jury? Well, I suppose it will have to be Christians, right? And I guess it will have to be Christians who take the Bible seriously – whatever that means!

The second question is what legal jurisdiction are we going to use? My suggestion is to use Scottish law. Why? Well, they have three verdicts: 'guilty', 'not guilty' and 'not proven'.

And this the point to which my thinking has taken me in <sup>[96–100]</sup>. I didn't start with 'the issue of homosexuality'; I started with Romans, trying to look at it as a whole – although my first drone flight <sup>[97]</sup> was only up over chapters 1 to 5. And then I got distracted by those two verses: 1:26,27.

I got out my Study Bible and looked up the cross references. It just gave me two in Leviticus, but deciding on ethical behavioural matters via Leviticus is fraught with danger – it depends which bits you decide are just cultural and which bits are immutable.

So I dug around for further biblical evidence, and found 1 Cor 6:9 (which refers to male *prostitutes* and homosexual *offenders*), 1 Tim 1:10 (*perverts*) and Jude 1:7 (*perverts*), so it's a matter of interpretation as to whether these could be applied to our case against consensual, faithful gay sex.

It seems that the strongest witness, then, is Rom 1:26,27 – and that worries me. Those two verses appear in the context of a two-chapter section in which Paul's main purpose is to accuse the Romans of being judgemental towards other people.

Can you see how shaky this Romans witness now becomes? We are wanting to use those two verses to decide (= make a judgement upon) whether certain other people's private actions are right or wrong in God's sight. Paul would see that as ironic to say the very least: a couple of verses in a long list aimed at telling the Romans not to be judgemental are later used as evidence for making a judgement.

But I'm not arguing for a 'not guilty' verdict; rather I'm saying that the evidence is not what I would call 'conclusive', and so we ought rather to bring in a verdict of 'not proven'.

And finally let's just ask, what would be the consequences of making the wrong decision?

If you are someone who thinks that the verdict should be ‘guilty’, what damage do you think that I am causing by trying to insist on ‘not proven’? Am I sweeping away God’s standards? Remember, I’m not talking about non-consensual or unfaithful acts.

I don’t know the history, but somebody in the UK put forward a motion to Parliament to enact the law that made homosexual actions illegal; was that mainly Christians? Whoever it was, it most certainly caused a great deal of harm. And even now, Christians in gay relationships are sometimes on the receiving end of harmful comments and attitudes from other Christians.

And the other thing that suffers if we insist on a ‘guilty’ verdict is our witness to the truth of the gospel – and Paul would be quick to condemn us if that happened. Many people simply will not take us seriously if we insist that we know that God condemns *all* homosexual actions per se. Can we not allow gay Christians to make their own mind up?

Since Paul is the chief witness in this case, I am bold to think that if he were alive in the 21st century, he would have said: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, gay nor straight, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* Gal 3:28.

Paul Bev. 30.12.19

## 102 Terrible four-letter words

Well, I’ve finally managed to get some bigger batteries, and so I’ve been able to fly my drone up over the whole of the Romans mountain chain – and what glorious sights I’ve seen. I admit there was a degree of ‘sameness’ – a bit like how I felt in 1999, when I went on a cycling tour of Norway: ‘Not *another* stunning lake/mountain view!’ But Paul *is* a bit repetitious.

So what did I see from the drone? As I’ve said, I saw a book written to Christians, about the gospel, how it was about faith (trust) from beginning to end (Rom 1) – we must trust God because God’s got a plan to bring blessing to the whole world. And God chooses people through whom to bring that blessing, first the Jews, then supremely Jesus, then the extended ‘Jewish’ family, as God grafted the Gentiles in, so that we could, together, bring blessing to the whole world.

But Paul is worried because he sees things going horribly wrong. God’s people are starting to use terrible four-letter words! The Pharisees (Paul was one such, and I feel a strong affinity here!) studied the scriptures ‘*because you presume that by them you possess eternal life. These are the very words that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.*’ (Jn 5:39,40) Instead, the Pharisees railed against what ‘they’ were doing, how ‘they’ were breaking God’s laws, and that ‘they’ needed to do this and not do that, or ‘they’ would be judged.

Paul wrote Romans, which was aimed squarely at Christians who, seeing the awful things that ‘they’ were doing (Rom 1), were becoming judgemental and hypocritical (Rom 2). You religious people aren’t any better than ‘they’ are, he says in Rom 3, we’re **all** sinners – yes, that includes **you**, my dear fellow believers!<sup>4</sup> It’s not about being right and boasting; it’s about trusting God (having faith), like Abraham (Rom 4) and Jesus (Rom 5). Don’t think in terms of punishment (Rom 6); it’s about life that comes by trusting God.<sup>5</sup> You religious people were ‘married’ to ‘being good’ (Rom 7) but you can be gloriously freed (Rom 8) to be ‘married’ to the Spirit. Yes, life is full of suffering because of sin, but by trusting (not by being ‘right’), you can be ‘more than conquerors’.

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<sup>4</sup> So we use Rom 3:23 (addressed to believers) to tell ‘them’ that ‘they’ are sinners. Doh!

<sup>5</sup> So we use Rom 6:23 (addressed to believers) to tell ‘them’ that ‘they’ are under God’s condemnation – **‘the wages of sin!’** Doh!



What about the actual physical Jews (Rom 9–11)? God’s plan has always been the same – to bring blessing to the whole world through God’s people, by grafting us into the family of God’s covenant people. So the Jews are very special.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, live in the freedom that trust (faith) brings – love, rejoice, serve (Rom 12) and live well as part of society, obeying the authorities<sup>7</sup> (Rom 13). Remember that we’re all different and we won’t agree about everything (Rom 14), but we’re a family, a community, so bear with each other and **stop passing judgement** on each other.<sup>8</sup>

Bear with each other and (Rom 15) **stop passing judgement** on each other. In particular, Jews and Gentiles should work together because we are all the true Jews – the covenant community of God. And watch out for those who cause divisions but stick to the gospel I taught you<sup>9</sup> (Rom 16).

You see what I mean about Paul, in Romans, being a bit repetitive? He is desperate for them to live as an open, non-judgemental community, to include, not exclude people, to unite around the good news, and for Jews and Gentiles to be ‘one in Christ Jesus’, a loving community.

*And in other news...* I wonder what Paul would think of our political systems (UK or worldwide), with all those terrible four-letter words – it’s all about what ‘they’ are doing and saying, and it leads to polarisation and an inability to accept that we are all different and won’t all agree, but let’s be an open, accepting community and try to work together for the common good, rather than trying to exclude ‘them’ by building metaphorical or literal walls.

And I’ve been fascinated to (proof)read Tim’s papers and his website, where he’s stressing exactly the same sort of thing: the importance of community – a school should be a learning community where everyone is learning and sharing and growing together, and that means teachers **and** parents, as well as pupils. And this is despite our differences – or maybe even enhanced by our differences. Tim thinks there is hope for society if we can work together and stop being judgemental. (But I think, personally, he does have problems with the church. Why? Because of our judgementalism. Doh!)

Certainly, that’s what I have valued most about St Edmund’s – a breadth of theological views, but everyone working together to make sure that any newcomer feels welcome.

And a fascinating personal footnote is that it was only after gradually realising my own keen ability as a Pharisee that I have personally met some of ‘them’: I had never personally known any gay couples before – now I know two – and I’ve recently got to know a lovely Muslim lady; then just this past week, I’ve been asked to edit the autobiography of a Holocaust survivor, co-written by a Jewish lady whom I ‘met’ through my computer programming (macros).

Finally, I’d like to apologise to any of you that I’ve upset by my own judgemental attitudes, displayed in these articles. Please bear with me as I too am on a journey!

Paul Bev. 2.1.20

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<sup>6</sup> And look how Christians have historically treated ‘them’! Well, ‘they’ killed Jesus, and ‘they’ deny that Jesus is Lord.

<sup>7</sup> But ‘they’ are permitting awful things, such as abortion and homosexuality, and ‘they’ are taking away Christians’ rights. Surely we should stand up against ‘them’ – be salt and light, as Jesus said!

<sup>8</sup> But ‘they’ are teaching things that are against (my interpretation of) the Bible, so ‘they’ will have to leave our church. Or if ‘they’ are the leaders, we’ll have to set up a new church, one that sticks to the true gospel, because ‘they’ are preaching ‘another gospel’ and so should be condemned (Gal 1:9).

<sup>9</sup> (I hope this isn’t being judgemental but ...) As I have said repeatedly, ‘the gospel’ is not the accurately defined mechanism of penal substitution; we need to trust that the full good news is held in the narrative of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus; this gives us life, in all its fullness.

## 103 Humpty Dumpty was wrong ... and right

Still writing? Why? It's partly because I'm on a journey and am trying to find my way, but it's also partly that I'm desperately trying to work out **why** I'm so much happier now than I've ever been. Plus, it's hard-wired into my character, that I have to know **how** and **why** things work.

But I don't just want abstract knowledge; it's intensely practical. I'm an obsessive-compulsive problem-solver. I want to make things (life) work better. (That same characteristic has made me a world expert on macros, i.e. God can redeem people's failings, to help other people.)

Enough preamble. Let's hear from Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass* (my bold):

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "**it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.**"

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "**which is to be master**—that's all."

So the other aspect of my character is that I'm fascinated by words and their meaning, and especially how those words can be put together to effectively convey what '*I choose it to mean*'.

But that's also God's problem. How can God communicate with us – effectively?

Well, thank God, we've got the Bible. Phew! Yes, but the Bible is made up of words, and words are very slippery customers, and especially because their meaning can change with time – I mean **totally** change.

The word 'nice' is a compliment, right? Well, it used to mean 'silly, foolish, simple'.

But then the word 'silly' went the other way; that used to be applied to things that were worthy or blessed; then it came to refer to the weak and vulnerable, and now it means foolish.

How is it ever possible for a word to completely change meaning? Humpty was right: 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.' The meanings of words change because of **the way people use them**.

It may be because people want to be deliberately counter-cultural, such as using 'wicked' to mean 'awesome' – or do I mean 'aweful' (another word whose meaning is changing/has changed!)?

But actually, Humpty was wrong – it's not so much about how **I** use them; it's about how **the majority** use them. Paul Beverley can't make people use words differently, but I can alert us to the danger.

Take 'repent' for example. Ask any educated person what it means, and they'll say something like, 'feel sorry about something you've done wrong'. And OED agrees: 'Feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or sin'.

Now, I'm no linguist or theologian, but isn't the origin of the word 'metanoia'? and doesn't that mean turning around, completely changing direction, i.e. turning your face towards God?

It's nobody's **fault** that we've lost so much of the positive value and meaning of the word 'repent', but when we're reading English translations of the Bible, we're the losers if we don't realise the positive sense that I think the writers of the New Testament intended.

But this comes back to Humpty's comment, 'which is to be master?' We must not allow the value and meaning of biblical words to be stolen from us.

One more secular example: What does it mean to say 'such and such has been sanctioned'? Ask the OED: Sanction: *Give official permission or approval for (an action)* **and** Sanction: *Impose a sanction or penalty on.*' The two totally opposite meanings both apply *today*.

OK, I tricked you slightly by saying ‘such and such’, because if it’s an *action* that has been sanctioned, then it’s meaning 1, but if it’s a *person or country* that has been sanctioned, it’s 2.

My point? **Check the context**, and certainly don’t quote things out of context!

[Hobbyhorse warning...] What do people today think of when they hear, ‘the wages of sin is death’? For many, it’ll be that God is going to smite you if you do things wrong. <sup>[24,52,72]</sup>

Why do people think that? It’s not their fault; it’s because **we** have (mis)quoted it out of context in order (for the best of motives) to get people to ‘repent’ (‘feel remorse for their sins’).

Can you see what I mean by saying that words are incredibly slippery customers?!

Paul Bev. 9.1.20

## ***104 I am not ashamed of the gospel***

The other reason why I’m still doing all this writing is my continuing concern for my (now 24) husbands who don’t share their partner’s faith – not to mention my own loved ones. So how can we communicate the gospel to them – and indeed to the vast majority of people around us?

What I’m going to say in this article may sound negative and over-pessimistic, but we **do** want people to come to faith, so we **do** need to be realistic, to face facts. And to do that, we need to recognise where we are today, in terms of people’s perception of our faith, and especially of the words and concepts that we use to try to communicate God’s love <sup>[103]</sup>.

For 50 years, I’ve been in churches that saw the gospel, conceptually, as follows:

God is holy → We sin → God’s punishment → DEATH

Jesus receives God’s punishment instead of us

We repent and believe the good news → LIFE

I may be over-dramatising it, but this is fundamentally ‘the gospel’ that we, as Evangelical, Bible-believing churches, have always taught, right? So, in order for my loved ones and your loved ones to come to faith, they have to understand all of that, right?

This way of seeing God’s work of salvation is called ‘penal substitution’, a term I didn’t know until I left my church of 37 years, but this is the biggest issue that I’ve been wrestling with since.

I mentioned in <sup>[103]</sup> about the complete misconception of *metanoia*, for which the only English word we have is ‘repentance’, and I touched on the misunderstanding of ‘sin’, which people think of as ‘doing bad things’ – where ‘bad things’ are as defined by the church.

Add to that the common view of ‘holiness’ as being linked to ‘holier than thou’ attitudes.

Then there’s the issue that people’s first introduction to God is as one who punishes you when you sin. And this is particularly difficult for those from abusive homes when, at the same time, we talk about God as ‘father’.

Then there’s the difficulty of getting across the legal idea of ‘substitution’. And some Christians feel it necessary and appropriate to use illustrations from prisoner of war camps <sup>[58]</sup>.

And some people find difficulty in the idea of God killing his own son – which frankly sounds really weird. And how can killing one person 2000 years ago affect me, today?

Am I being overly negative, or am I just being realistic about the uphill struggle we face?

Well, whatever you think about what I've just said here, if you belong to a church that says that penal substitution is 'the gospel', then you simply have to face up to these difficulties and pray that God will help you find a way to explain it all to your loved ones.

But let's look at a few historical facts for a minute. A man was born, he walked through Palestine, he taught people about 'the kingdom of God', he cared for the poor and marginalised, he was killed by the authorities, his followers were totally demoralised. Suddenly they regained their courage, they said Jesus had come back to life, they said the kingdom of God had come, they were persecuted, some were martyred, but the message of Jesus' kingdom spread in a few short years throughout the known world.

In answer to 'What must I do to be saved?', did Peter, Paul and his contemporaries preach about 'the penal substitutionary death and resurrection of Jesus', as we do today? The NT account suggests, rather, that they preached about 'the kingdom of God' having come, about 'death defeated' and 'victory won'.

Personally, I have decided that penal substitution is **not** a helpful means of explaining the gospel in the 21st century. So am therefore I watering down the gospel, or maybe even preaching 'another gospel'? Well, we each have to study our Bibles, draw our own conclusions, and faithfully act on that.

Thank you all for your support over these past months!

Paul Bev. 12.1.20

## **105 Who would be a Roman Christian?!**

Imagine you are living in Rome and you are a stalwart member of the church there, perhaps a church leader. In fact, let's imagine you are the vicar!

Monday morning, and your doorbell rings; you smile as you see it's the postman. "Morning, mate!" he says cheerily, "Sorry, but I couldn't get this one through your letterbox", and he hands you a very big letter:

**To all in Rome, who are loved by God, and called to be saints.**

"Brilliant!" you say to yourself. "I've been struggling to think what to put in my sermon this coming Sunday, I can just read out Paul's letter – that'll save lots of time, and I can justify watching more of the Masters Snooker on telly!"

But then you remember that in some of Paul's other letters, he does seem to say some quite controversial things. So you decide to read it through first, and not risk just reading it out.

You read chapter 1, and you are reassured – he's writing about the gospel, and he's saying how it's all about faith – trusting God. Good. And that it's by *faith, from beginning to end*. "Brilliant! I couldn't have put it better myself. You're right, mate! It's by faith, and *not by works*. Nice one!"

Then you feel really encouraged by the final 18 verses of chapter 1; they sound as if Paul was quoting one of his own sermons – all about the terrible things people do, and how God will bring his judgment on them for what they do. "Great, yes, people need to understand that they are sinners, so that they can acknowledge their need of God's forgiveness, and we can tell them how much God loves them and that Jesus died for them. Then they will repent and turn to Christ! Awesome! Just what we want, in case there are some non-Christians in the church on Sunday."

But then you start to read chapter 2, and realise that this *isn't* an evangelistic sermon; Paul is addressing the Christians in your church. And as you read through this second chapter you start to feel very nervous and wonder if you dare read it out to your congregation. What will they think?! And you start to get very hot under your clerical collar.

(I'll let you off the hook now and write it in the third person!)

Here's what the vicar read. In italic are the bits that stood out to him [plus his thoughts]:

You, therefore, have no excuse, *you who pass judgment on someone else*, for at whatever point you judge the other, *you are condemning yourself*, because you who **pass judgment** do the same things. [I know my congregation! They are God-fearing; they don't do any of those things in chapter 1!] Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things [I assume he means the catalogue of evil things from chapter 1] is based on truth.

So when you, a mere man, **pass judgment** on them and yet do the same things, *do you think you will escape God's judgment?* [But we're saved by the blood of Jesus; God isn't going to pass judgment on us!]

Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realising that God's kindness leads you towards repentance? But *because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath*, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. ['Stubborn and unrepentant'? That's grossly unfair! My folks are genuinely repentant, and they love God and serve God with all their hearts. I can't tell them they are stubborn and unrepentant!]

God "will give to each person according to what he has done". To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life. [Paul's lost it! He's now saying that eternal life comes by what we **do**. That's salvation by works!] (*But see also my article [60] about Jesus' sermon on the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46.*)

But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favouritism. [This is all very confusing, Paul!]

OK, I've hammed this up a bit, but the quotes from Romans 2 1-11 are the straight NIV text.

If I were a member of this vicar's congregation, and heard that read out, one (genuine) question I would have is, "What do you mean by 'pass judgement'?"

What is the difference between genuinely trying to work out what the Bible teaches about right and wrong, and 'passing judgment'?

And what is very much on my mind at the moment is my Christian friends who are in faithful, loving, gay relationships. How do we avoid passing judgment on them?

Paul Bev. 15.1.20

## 106 Why do you study the Scriptures?

I wrote this article a couple of days ago but felt that it needed polishing and ran out of time. This morning, I woke up seeing it differently, so I'm turning it around and giving you the conclusion first, albeit an even more tentative conclusion than usual.

Here's my idea. When we say 'salvation by works', what do we think of? Probably: 'You can't earn your way into God's favour by doing lots of good things.' And then 'salvation by faith' is that you have to believe that Jesus died on the cross to take away your sins. OK?

My conclusion is maybe that this isn't what Paul (and the Reformers) meant by saying: 'by faith, not by works'. Maybe 'works' is more like what the Pharisees did: spending loads of time searching the Scriptures to work out what's the **right thing to do** – then making it worse by dogmatically insisting that you now know what's right – then making it even worse by trying to force other people to do the 'right' things. (Over the centuries, the church has got that down to a fine art – to its shame.)

Here's my idea in a nutshell:

*Not by works...*

*by works he didn't mean doing good*

*by works he meant doing (and believing?) the 'right' things*

Isn't this what have I been doing for 50 years? I've been studying the Scriptures (I'm giving myself the benefit there in saying that I did what I did by *starting* from Bible study), working out what is the right thing to believe, and then persuading other people – whether that's other Christians or unbelievers (see my <sup>[0]</sup>).

Now here's the original start of this article:

At church on Sunday, my friend preached on Acts 10, and as the passage was read out, v.34 stood out to me as 'interesting'. Then my friend's sermon started with, 'What really stood out to me was v.34, at the start of Peter's sermon': *I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.*

Now add to that Paul's words <sup>[105]</sup> in Rom 2:7 – *To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life.* and 2:10 *but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good*.

Add to that Jesus' own words that have been niggling me for ages [105, cf 60] about sheep/goats, heaven/hell (Mt 25:31-46), where he clearly states that we are going to be judged on the basis of whether or not we have cared for the poor and marginalised, i.e. **what we do**.

So that's Peter, Paul and Jesus – and I'm confident that James wouldn't disagree – so I'm thinking of forming a new church, called the 'Blessed Jesus Works Church', preaching that the Reformers were wrong, and that salvation is indeed by **works**.

OK, OK, I'm messing about, but reading and re-reading Romans 3-8 has set me thinking about what Paul actually meant by 'by faith, not by works'. I think we tend to think of that in terms of, 'You can't get to heaven by doing good works'.

Now this morning I read what I wrote earlier, and my point was going to be that you can prove whatever stupid idea you have, by picking and choosing which Scriptures you quote (maybe out of context). While that is true, thinking about it now, maybe all those verses **do** mean what they say. Maybe God **is** concerned about what we do?!

OK, so why **do** we study the Scriptures? As I wrote in version 1 of this article:

One verse that stood out to me recently was 3:2, where Paul says that the Jews *have been entrusted with the very words of God*. Put alongside that: Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Ac 8:26ff) *Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus*, and in the Emmaus encounter (Lk 24.27): *And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself*.

So could we, could I 'share the gospel' purely by using the Old Testament? I don't think I could. But, anyway, what was 'the gospel' that spread like wildfire? It was the good news of Jesus – it was the first-hand accounts of the person and actions and death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus, which proved that God was true to the promise given to Abraham. And that's good news!

Rescue, redemption, exodus, freedom, release, victory has come, and we're free from death – the logical and natural consequence of living lives **not** focused on God, **not** worshipping God, **not** living in communion with God (as Adam and Eve did) but doubting God (as Adam and Eve did) and thinking that we can work out for ourselves what's what. That leads to death.

So I think we should study the Scriptures to get back in touch with the person and work of Jesus/God/Holy Spirit and **not** to work out the exact mechanism by which we are saved and the exact way we (and 'they') should behave – that is being a Pharisee and that way leads to death by dogmatism. Our churches will die, our families will die, our communities will die, we will die.

Jesus said to the Pharisees: *You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.* (Jn 5:39f)

After 50 years of trying to be right, it's very difficult to turn away from that attitude (repent of it), but I try every day to sit more and more lightly on 'being right' (= 'works'), and instead spend more time getting to know the Person (= 'faith', or perhaps better, 'trust').

Paul Bev. 19.1.20

(Disclaimer: I don't know whether the argument I'm going to share here is valid, but I'll present it anyway, and you can make your own mind up.)

The list of people within my *oikos* is still growing; I mean those friends and fellow churchgoers whose husbands/wives/partners don't share their faith. (I think everyone has a faith in something, but I think you know what I mean.) I do pray for these people (25 of them now), and I have talked and prayed with friends about them, but I haven't come up with anything specific that I/we should actually DO.

And that's not to mention those of us with siblings, children, parents and close friends who don't share our faith. And I'm guessing that I have now included anyone and everyone reading this – and then some.

OK, so what's Paul's latest 'good idea'?!

I'm wondering if it will help to think of God as the 'Ultimate Parent', and to ask ourselves how such an Ultimate Parent views our loved ones.

God created us – in love, and for love. God loves us desperately, achingly – that theme is plain, right through the Old Testament and the New Testament. So maybe we can understand better how God views our loved ones if we use an *a fortiori* argument (woo!): if we ask how a good human parent feels and acts – a really, really good human parent – then God, the Ultimate Parent, must be much, much better than that.

I do claim some precedent for this. Jesus told what Tom Wright refers to as the Parable of the Running Father. I wonder if we can understand just how shocking that parable was to its first hearers?! We normally call it the Parable of the Lost Son, but I think that's a misnomer; we use it as a parable about how we sin, but if we repent, God will generously forgive us. But in my Bible, the heading, 'Parable of the Lost Son', is applied to all 22 verses of Luke 15:11ff – but Jesus spoke about **two** sons, not just one. (I'm struggling to stop myself "going off on one", about our individualisation of salvation, but I'll resist...)

...No, I won't! Isn't that part of why we're so worried about our loved ones?! We're saying, "I'm worried that if they don't repent of their sins, they'll go to hell." But I **certainly** hope we're not expressing it as, "...God will *send* them to hell." That's not what an Ultimate Parent would do.

Anyway, I think it's a parable more about an Ultimate Parent, than about the two sons, let alone about just **one** son. The first scandal – hence Wright's 'Running Father' – was the shock that Jesus' hearers would have felt at the idea of the head of a big household (it included a number of servants) hitching up his skirts and racing down the road. Wright likens it to the Prime Minister showing up at the state opening of Parliament in a bathing costume! (I was going to comment that it's nice to find someone who uses overstatement more than I do, but of course we have a precedent: Jesus used some heavy hyperbole.)

So the father ran down the road and hugged his wayward son who was covered in pig shit. Sorry, but we have to see how totally shocking that was, to understand what an amazing parent God is!

And we haven't finished with scandal. The ring and the robe ... and the party. That was totally and utterly unreasonable! and the elder brother was right – it was totally unfair! In view of the facts of **both** sons' wrong attitudes (our wrong attitude), God's forgiveness is totally unreasonable, and it's unfair, and we can't understand it or explain it, but – according to Jesus, anyway – it's freely available to anyone and everyone willing to trust Jesus.

We desperately need to understand how God views our loved ones. God loves them way more than we ever could, and God is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). In other words, God wants the prodigal to "turn around (repent) and come back into the family" and God also wants the elder brother to "turn around (repent) and come back into the family" – same God, same message for all.

Of course, Love can't **force** anyone to come back into those wide-spread open arms – compulsion isn't love. But an Ultimate Parent will do anything and everything possible to demonstrate their love. And that, I guess, is what we need to do for our loved ones.



Finally, what do you make of Paul's statement that: *For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.* (1 Cor 7:14)? Yes, that's what he said; you can make your own mind up about what he meant, but I take it as a real encouragement in prayers for my own family.

Above all, for my family's sake, I'm praying that I will be filled more and more with the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – perhaps especially patience.

So I'm standing firm, trusting the Ultimate Parent, and together we'll do all we can to show unconditional love to our loved ones, and watch to see what God will do.

Paul Bev. 26.1.20

## 108 The greatest sin?

We've just enjoying watching some of the old episodes of Cadfael, and even some episodes of Father Brown that claim to be new. But what I love about both (as well as trying to work out 'who done it') is the positive, restorative, forgiving attitude of the central character. It's a tonic to see Christians portrayed (and by extension God portrayed) as NOT being judgmental, bigoted, condemnatory – unlike Brother Jerome, wringing his hands in anguish (or rubbing his hands in glee?), and obsessing about 'mortal sin', when Brother Oswyn admits to having had thoughts of kissing a woman.

For years, I've complained about the media's attitude to Christians, saying basically, "It's not fair, the way they portray us!"

My article about why we study the Bible <sup>[106]</sup> was rather confused, but I do think it carried an element of truth: We all too easily study the Scriptures, work out what is 'right', and then slip into judgmental attitudes towards those who have come to a different conclusion.

Let's try to look at this objectively. Let's look from outside the Christian church, perhaps with the eyes of someone in the media, wondering how to portray Christians...

This person looks to see what "Christians" are saying or have said that "the Bible teaches..."

- Women should not be in (certain) leadership roles in the church.
- Men in leadership must be celibate.
- Men who are homosexual must remain celibate.
- Women who are homosexual must remain celibate.
- Infant baptism is wrong. (Didn't people fight and kill each other over this one?)
- If you don't speak in tongues, you're not really a proper Christian.
- If you pray for healing and don't receive it, you're somehow not praying right.
- If you're a Christian then God will bless you (financially? health-wise?).
- (My history's poor, but I guess that) the Spanish Inquisition believed they were being biblical.
- Witches should be burnt.

– All the Catholic/Protestant stuff (yes, there's politics in there too, but it started theologically).

My point is not that the people holding any of the views above were/are right or wrong. Rather, the greatest sin, I think (and according to my reading of Romans 1 & 2!) is judgmentalism. Look back at that list and think how much suffering we Christians have **caused** by our attitudes – we're supposed to be *alleviating* suffering! And it's not just the physical suffering (torture and murder), but also the mental and emotional suffering we have caused, and are still causing now, today!

Can we not agree to disagree about some of our interpretations of the Bible, and live in love for one another, live in community, respecting one another's views? And wouldn't that be a witness to those outside the church?!

(There is a day conference in Norwich next week aimed to "help those who experience same-sex attraction to stay faithful to Biblical teaching on sexual ethics and flourish at the same time". Please pray that they – and we – may have the mind of Christ.)

Paul Bev. 4.2.20

## 109 Where are we going?

A big thank-you to those of you who have kept with me on my journey; some of you have encouraged me to continue, some have argued with me, some have prayed for me, some have prayed *with* me – all very much appreciated, believe me!

*Time to take stock.* It all started in spring 2017, when I found a way of seeing God (as a Trinity) that won my heart. I read a book that resonated with my desire for relationship, and at the exact same time, we moved to the local C of E church, where we *found* relationship. This church embodies welcome; this church *is* welcome. Every new person who joins the church says the same thing: "When I first came to this church I was at a difficult point in my life, and I was made to feel so welcome..."

Don't get me wrong, I haven't found the perfect church, but I have found *something*.

In mid 2018, having done lots of reading, I tried to articulate why I was now so happy, and why I was so **unhappy** with the way I had lived my Christian life for 50 years. I'm an engineer, so I want to know how things work! And, of course, I wanted to share the happiness I'd found.

Well, after 18 months and 109 articles, have I got 'the answer'? And, if so, why am I still writing? I've read a lot of books and, latterly, read rather a lot more of my Bible – it's a privilege to have time, energy and inspiration to keep going, keep learning, keep seeing things differently.

But have I come to any actual conclusions? any important ideas? any crucial emphases?

For me, the absolute essential is who we *are*. "By this will everyone know you are my disciples" We have to be real, honest and genuine. So we have to pray regularly for the fruit of the Spirit. (God has recently stressed *patience*...with people and with situations, and with myself.)

All very wishy-washy, yes, I know, so what about the *content* of what we believe – and what about how we communicate this good news in the 21st century? This is vitally important, if there is going to still be a church in the UK after we oldies have died!

So I guess that's what I've been trying to do here, trying to put into words 'the gospel', so that when people say, "You're a lovely lot here, so welcoming, but why?!" we'll know what to say.

And yes, the church – we – have got our work cut out because of some of the awful things that I mentioned last time <sup>[108]</sup> that ‘the church’ has done in the name of God, over the centuries.

So what is coming through to me in all this studying and thinking? For now, just a few strands that I/we could perhaps follow.

– The gospel is all about Jesus – a real person – would it help to concentrate more on the man?

– In a ‘self-focused generation’ some people (e.g. my Tim, in his professional life) are stressing ‘community’. But the early church was all about community – can we regain that? For too long, ‘the gospel’ has been all about personal salvation – me and my salvation – and you can join the church once you’re saved.

– In a ‘we can explain everything’ generation, we have turned ‘the gospel’ into a mechanism by which we are saved. But *how* we are saved (made whole again) is a mystery; God is a mystery. The Bible has many strands to help us appreciate salvation – maybe we need a broader view.

– I’ve just noticed that even John the Baptist “preached the good news of the kingdom”, but that was before Jesus started preaching, let alone before his death and resurrection. Discuss!

– Are we too precious – to the detriment of the gospel – about the Bible? It’s an essential pointer, yes, but it’s not an infallible instruction manual. (I was amused to notice the other day that Mark, in his Gospel, says “It is written in Isaiah the prophet...” and then quotes Malachi 3:1!)

– One strand I want to follow is that, of all the OT quotes in the NT, the majority are from Isaiah, mainly from chapters 40–55. Why was the suffering servant so important to the early church?

I’m currently reading Tom Holland’s *Contours of Pauline theology*, and realising how different Paul’s writings look when seen through the eyes of his first hearers, in terms of community, covenant, the fulfilment of all that God had been saying, i.e. “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15). To try to make Paul’s ideas fit into our ‘personal salvation model’ is a very square peg! But let’s see what the suffering servant has to say.

Paul Bev. 7.2.20

## **110 A book for Lent?**

At Lent last year, I was very powerfully affected by Derek Flood’s 2012 book, *Healing the Gospel*, and I summarised some of its chapters in <sup>[50–54,57]</sup>. This week, I remembered that it had a fair bit to say about Isaiah’s ‘suffering servant’ – often quoted in the NT – so I was drawn to it again. Rather than reading my regurgitation, why not take it as a Lent book? I have a couple of copies that I could lend to my Norwich readers.

Flood’s book presents a practical and biblical critique of the gospel ‘as we’ve always been taught’ (penal substitution), and then offers an understanding of the gospel which I think is (a) closer to what the (whole) Bible teaches, (b) something that I could share without embarrassment with unbelieving friends, and (c) practically applied to show that it can positively affect society as a whole, rather than just concentrating on individual, personal salvation.

I could say much more, but I’ll restrain myself (difficult!). Either just trust me and read it, or look at what a proper theologian says of the book. Here are extracts from Brian McLaren’s foreword:

For me, growing up evangelical meant growing up believing that the gospel *was* the theory of penal substitutionary atonement. Trusting Christ, accepting Christ, getting saved, being born again all meant – covertly or overtly – accepting the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement...

That's the version of the gospel that we broadcast 24/7 on radio and television across America and around the world. That's the version of the gospel that many missionaries use to define effectiveness, that many theologians use to define faithfulness, and that many Christians and non-Christians use to define Christianity itself.

*[Brian then relates his own tentative and difficult steps, some years earlier, in questioning this view.]*

And back then, there was no book by Derek Flood to help me. But now there is such a book to help you.

You may never have heard the term “penal substitutionary atonement”, but you “know” it – it's the point of everything for millions of Christians around the world: [What is] the only problem that really matters? *God's just and infinite wrath at our sin.* The only good news that really matters? *How to be rescued from the fiery lake of divine wrath.* The main reason that Jesus matters? *Because Jesus took that wrath upon himself, so we don't have to.*

If you've had qualms about some parts of that doctrinal system, this is the book you need. I'm enthusiastic about it for four reasons.

First, it's simple and short ...

Second, it engages with Scripture in a responsible, mature, and faithful way ...

Third, it engages with Christian history with equal maturity, responsibility, and faithfulness ... Where he must disagree ... he does so respectfully, sympathetically, and fairly.

And fourth, this book combines the mind of a theologian with the eye and heart of an artist. Derek sees that meaning comes in images and narratives, not just formulas, theories, or models. *[Communicating through images and narratives is **exactly** what Jesus did!]* So he combines the two, and, in the process, presents us with something we thought we knew but didn't really.

No doubt that's a big part of what *repentance* means ... acknowledging that we didn't really know before, and thereby opening ourselves up to a fresh and deeper knowing. *[Very much my experience.]*

I had two great fears when I began rethinking my inherited understanding of the gospel and the atonement. First, I was afraid that I would get in trouble with my authority figures and my peers ... Second, I was afraid that I would end up somewhere less biblical than where I started. Because I didn't have a book like this available to me, I stepped out with great fear and trepidation.

But as I now read Derek's book, I feel more than ever that the view he proposes is not *less* biblically defensible ... but even *more* so. I think you'll agree that the view he proposes is most faithful to Scripture in its totality, both in a close reading, where all the details are attended to, and in a more expansive reading for the broader themes and narratives that it explores.

This fresh approach to the Bible not only heals our understanding of the gospel, but it also offers healing to us – because a distorted gospel will inevitably harm us. And through us, a distorted gospel harms the world at large. *[That's **exactly** what I feel has happened!]*

Our world suffers not only from the ravages of sin – personal and systemic – but also from the ravages of sincere and zealous, but misguided and misguiding, religion. *[and then some!]* This book, like the original gospel it seeks to clarify, is about being saved, freed, and healed from all those ravages, in all their forms.

That's why I am so grateful for this book. If you are willing to step out and walk through the following pages with Derek Flood as your guide, a lot of healing can flow. A lot of healing indeed. *[Absolutely!]*

## **111 The big, Big, BIG GOSPEL**

(Apologies if this is a bunch of incoherent ramblings, but it might help someone in some way.)

Throughout this journey one recurring thought has been: “How did ‘the gospel’ turn the world upside down?” Why was it so life-changing, so world-shattering? Why were so many people (willing to be) martyred? Why was Paul willing to suffer so much for the gospel?

Would I be willing to go through a fraction of what my name-sake suffered?

Good question!

Would you?

I can't claim ‘Yes, I would’, but the more I study, the bigger the gospel becomes in my thinking and feeling, and the more I realise how poor and narrow my view was for so many years.

In what I say here, I'm not trying to criticise anyone. As I've said before, I don't have ‘the answer’, but I have a direction of travel where, as I journey, the view I see ahead gets more and more glorious, and I see more and more wonderful aspects of the kingdom of God.

In trying to be positive, I fear that I still have to start with the negative, in order to point towards where I think the positive is to be found. And maybe we can travel onwards together and share our discoveries – I would love that! (Some of you already are. Thanks!!)

So, the gospel, as I was taught it, was about how (by recognising my sin and accepting Jesus' death in my place) I can gain personal salvation, so that when I face God, at death or when Jesus returns, I won't get turned away, but will be welcomed into God's kingdom (though I never used to talk about ‘kingdom’, only ever about ‘going to heaven’). Once you become a Christian, you need to grow as a Christian, be a disciple, grow in Bible study and prayer, and Christian service.

Does this sound familiar? And I'm sorry, but I really can't see how that view of the gospel would ‘turn the world upside down’. Lack of faith on my part, perhaps?

Remember, I'm not saying any of the above is wrong; I'm just asking if there is a way we could broaden our view – otherwise, why am I now so much more enthusiastic?! Here, I can only give you a few pointers, clues, directions. Some of it will sound very vague (some of it *is* very vague) and some of it is as yet unexplored (by me, anyway). And there's no space here to explain them.

The entry point for me was ‘discovering’ the Trinity – God as relationship. What a joy that was!

I now see the good news as much more Jewish and a lot less Greek. Jesus said he came to ‘fulfil the Law’; ‘the Bible’ in the early church was the OT; Jesus ‘explained in all the (OT) Scriptures’.

By less Greek, I mean questioning its dualistic thinking, and trying to see things more holistically – not in the modern sense, but I mean biblically holistic, i.e. Jewish holism.

The death of Jesus means so much more to me now: it's not just personal salvation but it says something about suffering (from both ill health and natural disasters), and it also speaks into systemic evil. It may not have 'answers', but the cross does have real power in those areas.

'The suffering servant' is very much in my mind just now. What does the sacrifice of Jesus mean? Was it just a substitution? A scapegoat? I think not. I'm currently looking at the Jewish sacrificial system on which the first-century 'gospel' was based. (I'll be off to mine the book of Hebrews when I've finished this article.)

And, yes, a lot of this is inspired by Flood's *Healing the Gospel* that I raved about last time <sup>[110]</sup>.

Paul Bev. 14.2.20

## ***112 Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed***

"Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself... Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Lk 24)

This is where my journeyings have brought me. That quote burns into my heart and soul too. If we want to understand what Christ did for us on the cross, that understanding *has* to be based on the Old Testament. The New Testament is *not* God's second attempt at rescuing us – it's all one. It's a new covenant, yes, but God made a number of covenants; it's all there in the (OT) plan.

How can we "understand" it? We can't; it's God's work we're talking about. Is it a mechanism? No, but my character is one that wants to know, "Yes, but how does it actually work?!" So I hope you'll bear with me as I lay out the ideas that have been going through my mind as I've read (again) Flood's book,<sup>10</sup> and as I read right through Hebrews almost at a sitting.

From John's announcement, "Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" to the Book of Revelation, where Christ is referred to 30 times as "the Lamb". I have come to the inescapable conclusion that Passover was absolutely the centre of the faith of the early church. They understood what God had done in Christ *through* their understanding of (maybe better, their appreciation of) the Passover. And that's why the celebration of Communion/Eucharist/breaking of bread is so central to our worship.

So **how** did Christ's sacrifice take away the sins of the whole world? And remember, it has to be understood as a piece, right through from the Old Testament into the New Testament. Here I will set out different ways of understanding 'sacrifice', and you can see what you think. First, the prevailing pagan view in NT times:

1) The gods are angry; we offer sacrifices to appease the anger of the gods (to propitiate them).

Clearly, that is not the Jewish (or Christian) view. The giving of sacrifices (ours or Jesus') does not change God's attitude from anger to love. God loves us, and no amount of sacrificing can make God love us more.<sup>11</sup> ("While we were still sinners, Christ died...")

2<sup>OT</sup>) We sin; God is angry; we (Jews) offer a sacrifice and God's anger is propitiated.

2<sup>NT</sup>) We sin; God is angry; Jesus offers a once-for-all sacrifice and God's anger is propitiated.

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<sup>10</sup> *Healing the Gospel*, Derek Flood.

<sup>11</sup> Even the strongest proponents of penal substitution acknowledge that while the cross appeases God's wrath, it doesn't, in any way, "make God love us". Flood quotes both Calvin and John Stott on this point. [Flood p. 27]

Once God's anger has been propitiated, our sin can be washed away (technical term: expiated).

3<sup>OT</sup>) We sin; God is angry; God gives us a sacrifice (blood); we (Jews) are cleansed (expiated).

3<sup>NT</sup>) We sin; God is angry; Jesus offers a once-for-all sacrifice; we (all) are cleansed (expiated).

Once God has cleansed us, there is no reason for God to be angry, i.e. God's anger is turned away (propitiated).

As 20th century Christians (and in certain of the previous centuries), we have been brought up to believe that God is holy and therefore God *cannot* forgive sins unless and until a penalty has been paid, so Jesus paid the penalty on our behalf.

However, my reading of Hebrews (strongly influenced by Flood, I admit) has led me to believe that this is *not* how the (OT or NT) Jews saw sacrifice, and therefore it shouldn't be our (Christian) way of seeing Christ's sacrifice.

At the Passover, the people of God obeyed God's instructions, they trusted God, they had faith in God. They didn't "give God a sacrifice"; rather, they and we received the protective sacrificial blood and were rescued, ransomed, redeemed, restored, forgiven...

So, no, I don't have a nice neat simple mechanism by which we are saved, but I do know a God who loves us desperately, prodigally. And God says that there is a way for us to return to the Father: Christ died "*for us*". In simple faith, we receive that death into our own life. And it is simply wonderful, brilliant, awesome, fantastic, humbling, exciting, and ultimately worth sharing.

Paul Bev. 16.2.20

Christ's work as cleansing:

*Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word (Eph 5:25,26)*

*How much more, then, will the blood of Christ ... cleanse our consciences (Heb 9:15)*

*In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. (Heb 9:22)* This verse (only the second part) is sometimes quoted to support the idea that "God cannot forgive without someone dying for our sin" – but, as you see, the verse is about cleansing, not substitution.

*If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. (Heb 10:2)*

*...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience (Heb 10:22)*

And possibly: *You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. (Jn 15:3)*

## **113 Relationship from beginning to end**

To an 18-year-old, coming from a dysfunctional family, the Christian community at Scargill in Yorkshire was a revelation! Over the next 50 years, that sense of relationship (a.k.a. love) has waxed and waned. Now, I have found it again, big time!

And, guess what, it's actually what the whole of God's Big Plan is all about. Always was, always will be.

With my recent insistence that we can only really understand the gospel if we see that the gospel is right there, in the Old Testament, I think I'm seeing the Old Testament in a whole new light.

I was thrilled to hear my Muslim friend say that there's more in the Qur'an about Allah's love than there is about condemnation, and I think I would now say exactly the same about the Old Testament, so let's trace it through (® = 'relationship')...

Creation: 'it's not good for man to be alone': ® is essential.

Garden of Eden: "Did God say...?" By our doubting God's good intentions, ® goes wrong.

Abraham is "the friend of God" ®

Abraham trusted God ® and it was counted to him as righteousness (= right ®)

Abraham: "through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me" – bringing ® to the world.

[We're going to be here all day if I go right through whole of the OT, so just a highlight or two and then, when you next read something in the OT, you can ask yourself if it's ®.]

The ten commandments®? Rules, rules, rules?! Actually, no! The 10C are *all* ®? Even "Six days shall you labour..." because developing ® takes time: the Sabbath, very positively, gives us time.

Most obviously, ® is in the Jews' hymnbook, the heart of their worship: whilst the psalms are brutally honest, yet they are stacked to the gunwales with ®®®.

The book of Hosea (do read it if you don't know what I mean): Amazingly, unrelentingly ®®®!

The Suffering Servant in Isaiah. ®®®!

Even Job is ultimately ®.

Then there's the wonderful book of Ruth ®®®.

So we can see that right through the OT, God rescues, redeems and forgives his people. They sin, but God forgives them; over and over again God forgives them and draws them back.

"But isn't the OT all about how God smites people when they do wrong?!"

Well, sort of, but underneath it all is God's overwhelming love for the people of God (and "through them, all the nations shall be blessed," is the plan). The negative stuff comes when God's people stop trusting God; God never breaks their special relationship (covenant); always it's the people who doubt God's goodness or God's power, so they look for other forms of security – other gods; "we want a king"; they make alliances with other (unbelieving) nations... As a result, it all goes horribly wrong, and the people suffer.

When this happens, you could say that "God is punishing them" – that's how it feels – but at root it's all about their having doubted God's goodness, doubted God's power, God's wisdom, God's provision, God's love, God's forgiveness: They have broken ®!

But God *keeps on forgiving them, keeps on forgiving them*, keeps on drawing them back, keeps on loving them. What a long-suffering God! ®®®

That's the glorious, wonderful God I now see in the Old Testament, but...



(And here I'm going to do something very naughty; I'm going to play devil's advocate, big-time; I'm going to use over-statement for effect. "Really?!" Please forgive me.)

... what a different view we get of God when we get to the New Testament! The God of the New Testament says:

"You have sinned against me and you deserve to die – the wages of sin is death! You were born in sin and you will be eternally separated from me, unless you believe.

"But I am a loving God and so I will give my Son to die a cruel and painful death so that you can be forgiven."

So we sing, "On the cross when Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied".

God says, "There is *no forgiveness* unless and until you appreciate that Jesus took upon himself the awful punishment *you deserve for your sins*: Jesus died in your place."

OK, I've over-stated the penal substitutionary view, but is there anything in what I have just said that you have **not** heard time and time again from pulpits up and down the country?

My own view is that an over-emphasis on penal substitution has given us a distorted view of God, which we have then projected back onto the Old Testament, so we cannot see how even the Old Testament shows the aching, longing, prodigal love of the Father that Jesus taught about – forgiving, forgiving, forgiving to the uttermost!

No wonder people hung on Jesus' every word, as he revealed to them the Good News of the Kingdom – there in the Jews' own Scriptures.

Now add to what I see as that distortion of the gospel, the hours that Christians have spent telling other people, including non-believers, (with the best of motives!) that the way they are living is wrong, and that God will judge them for it. It's hardly surprising that a diminishing fraction of the people we live amongst will darken the doors of a church on Sundays!

We need to heal the gospel <sup>[111,112]</sup> (that we have allowed to become so distorted) and get back to the loving God of the Old Testament!

Paul Bev. 18.2.20

## ***114 Good news, bad news***

I have really begun to see the Old Testament in a whole new light <sup>[113]</sup>, and to see how stashed full it is of God's love. So, if this is what Jesus was teaching, it's not surprising that they hung on his every word. Then, when Jesus died and rose again, pennies began to drop all over Jerusalem, and Judea, and to the ends of the earth, as this amazing realisation (good news) came, that Jesus, from this tiny town called Nazareth, was actually the focus of the whole of the Old Testament. That God is restoring and renewing people. How truly amazing and wonderful and life-changing!

That has explained to me something that I've wondered about these past few years: how and why did the gospel spread like wild-fire, such that people were even willing to die for Jesus?

But why (in UK at least) is there so little wild-fire?

Well, in Jesus' day, people were being told by the "church" (the religious leaders) that the Bible (the OT) teaches that they were miserable sinners and that if they didn't "do it right" they would face God's wrath and condemnation.

And guess what? In the 21st century, we "preach the gospel", i.e. we tell people over and over that they are miserable sinners and that unless they "believe in Jesus", they will – not to put too fine a point on it – be condemned by God and go to hell.

Good news?! Gospel?!

Think about it educationally, if nothing else. How do you get a child to grow, develop, reach their full potential, become a fully rounded person? Well, it's important, first and foremost, that they should realise that, in and of themselves, they are useless and hopeless, and that unless they are willing to accept the help that is offered, they are condemning themselves to a fruitless life.

No, we wouldn't do that in education, so why do we think it's Christian good news?! Well, surely it's because that's what the Bible teaches, isn't it? But are you sure? Well, if so, then it's hardly surprising that the fire has gone out!

But *has* the fire has gone out?!

**No! It certainly hasn't!** Not for me, not for my local church, not for many others that I've been talking to! And, thankfully, we're very much not alone. It feels as if there's a tide arising that sees God as accepting, welcoming, restoring, renewing, redeeming, loving...

But stop! Isn't this all just wishy-washy wishful thinking?! Are we getting away from the true teaching of the Bible? Are we losing the sinfulness of sin? Are we becoming liberal anything-goes people?

No! In fact, I hope and believe that we're becoming MORE biblical. I've certainly *never* spent so much time studying my Bible as I have of late. What I think and hope we've done is started to look at the Bible more as Jesus looked at the Old Testament, and what a glorious view it is too!

More of this ever-expanding panorama anon.

Paul Bev. 1.3.20

## ***115 Good news! Good news!***

In the faith tradition I come from, the Bible is central. Has that changed for me? Well, yes and no. I would say that I don't so much have faith in the Bible, but rather in the God who is portrayed in the Bible.

In the first days of my faith, I realised that, while it all sounded like really good news, I sussed that it all depended on the Bible; and how could I know whether it was reliable?! A wise elderly gentleman I met (he was probably 50 or 60!) didn't try to defend it, rather he asked me, "Would the God that you have come to know and love give you a document that was **not** reliable?!"

So, 50 years on, what would I say to that enquiring 20-year-old? Just a few thoughts...

- **It's not an infallible document.** It was written by fallible humans. For example, Mark, who said, "As Isaiah wrote", and then quoted Malachi <sup>[109]</sup>, and yesterday I spotted Mt 2:23 *So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene,"* yet no biblical – or other – prophecy exists, as far as anyone can find out, talking about a Nazarene!

Saying that the Bible is infallible makes it like cast iron – one tiny crack and the whole thing can shatter. To me, though, the Bible is more like steel, i.e. because it's flexible, not rigid, it stays solid when it's subjected to a range of different forces from different directions.

- **It's not a scientific document.** Treat the Bible as if it were, and you can bring it into disrepute. If we don't allow our growing scientific understanding of the world to influence how we understand the message of the Bible, we can cause people to reject it. It's made of steel; it is perfectly well able to withstand challenges from evolution, quantum physics, cosmology, neuroscience, developmental psychology (e.g. physical chastisement <sup>[77]</sup> and gender issues <sup>[101]</sup>) – but it can only withstand pressure if we're willing to be flexible.

- **It's not an immutable guide to behavioural ethics.** (That was the Pharisees' mistake.) Yes, it provides wonderful guidelines for interpersonal and inter-creational behaviour, but trying to tie that down to specifics turns it from steel to cast iron.

OK, enough of your 'not's, Paul. What IS the Bible? Why is it so strong and flexible like steel?

- **See the Person behind it.** In Jesus' teaching, he always looked behind the teaching of the Old Testament to the nature of the Person it portrayed – the prodigal Father – the Exodus-shaped God. Jesus pointed always to the loving Father seeking to rescue, redeem, release, restore, recover, regather, rehabilitate, renovate, rebuild. (Sorry, I got a bit carried away there!)

- **See the different writing styles.** Why is there so much of a variety of types of literature, so many different types of author? We all learn in different ways, and at different times in our lives, so God has gone to great lengths in the Bible to communicate his love in all sorts of different ways. God is desperate that we should appreciate his love, and will do whatever it takes to communicate it.

- **See that it's mainly in narrative form.** But we don't like that! Maybe that's the spirit of the age? We want facts. "Just give me the facts!" But that's not how God communicates, sorry. It's not about giving us facts; God wants to change our hearts (how else can sin be defeated?!) and narrative is a very powerful means. A story doesn't have to be true literally factually true in order to communicate truth. (Are parables literally true?!)

- **Study it for relationship.** If we study the Bible in order to *understand* God, we're bound to fail. Rather, study is as a means to find the Person behind it. Then we'll be able to give God our worth-ship; we'll love God for all he's worth.

Paul Bev. 1.3.20

## 116 Taking the Bible more seriously

I decided that, for Lent, I would give up reading Christian books and only read the Bible. For starters, I took off on a drone flight over Luke's Gospel – as I did with Romans, and which I found so helpful for getting the bigger picture. But it didn't quite work...

Day 1: The first 25 verses of Luke 1 (i.e. less than half a chapter)

Day 2: Half a verse! – I followed up 'Nazareth', found the 'Nazarene' error and wrote <sup>[114,115]</sup>

Day 3: Almost three chapters! Yay!

Day 4: Half a sentence (Luke 5:1), and here we are again, with an article about it!

"One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding round him and **listening to the word of God, ...**"

Knowing what most people mean when they say 'the Word of God', I then decided to check out the NT's use of this phrase (38 times) and also 'the Word of the Lord' (10 times). What ideas do they convey? How long have you got?! It carries a breadth of meaning in different contexts.

But of those 48 occurrences, I couldn't actually see any that referred to the written words that we now call 'the Bible'! So where did the idea come from that 'the Word of God' means 'the Bible'?

With a strong 'I want to know why!' urge, I broke my Lenten fast and went to internet to find out what Christians say about this. At the end of the article is the second item that Google offered me, and it starts,

***Word of God – The Bible** so called because the writers of its several books were God's organs in communicating his will to men.*

The definition then goes on to explain that 'Whatever the inspired writers here declare to be true and binding upon us, God declares to be true and binding' and 'therefore free from all error of fact or doctrine or precept.'

As you can imagine, I have real problems accepting that, for various reasons:

- 1) There clearly **are** errors, e.g. the two I found, so it's not inerrant, well not unless you say it's inerrant except for certain passages that are ... errant.
- 2) How do we know exactly what the 'truth' is that is 'binding upon us' (always assuming that we **can** know what 'true' is exactly)? Answer: we have to interpret the meaning of the words.
- 3) In any case, which version of the Bible are we talking about? i.e. which set of books do we accept as being canonical?

I'm more than happy that the Bible is both inspired and inspiring, but I don't understand how we get away from the human element in the process of searching for God's truth.

- 1) One set of humans (OK, inspired by God) wrote the books that we now call 'the Bible'.
- 2) Other humans decided (but some disagreed) which books should make up 'the Bible'.
- 3) Another set of humans (interpret, in order to) translate the Bible into English.
- 3) Another set of humans (you and me) interpret it to apply it to our lives.

And yet despite all these human factors some Christians want us to accept that 'the Word of God' is infallible and inerrant.

But let's look at this from a different perspective. Why did God inspire people to write the Bible in the first place? It was to communicate to us the wonderful unending love that we see in Jesus.

And when we agree with Paul that 'all scripture' was inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16,17), which scriptures did he include? (It was partly a prophetic statement because some of the books that we now insist are in 'the Scriptures' hadn't been written at that stage!)

Can God **only** speak to us through those 66 books (+ the Apocrypha if your church allows it). Did God **only** inspire those few books? Does God not also inspire other humans to communicate that amazing love to us in written and other ways – poets, hymn writers, song writers, artists, banner makers(!), architects, sculptors? No, God will use any and every way to help us to appreciate what Jesus has done in dying for us, so that sin might be conquered, and we can live to praise of God.

Why then do we get so precious about those 66 particular 'sacred' books? Here are a couple of suggestions.

- 1) **Fear of sliding into error.** But I did a pretty good job of sliding into error while still only using the required 66 books! "Yes, but you got your interpretation wrong." OK, but who's to say that my views now are any less in error than they were then?!

And the Pharisees were expert at interpreting Scripture to work out what was true, but just look at what Jesus thought of them!

2) **Control.** While (1) is at least a good motive, this one is a bit suspect. We can all see how the church has manipulated people by insisting that they had a monopoly of truth, and that if people didn't pay money, behave in a particular way, etc., then they would suffer the consequences.

Think of the trouble that Wycliffe and others faced for translating the Bible into a language that people could actually understand. The clergy were worried they would no longer be in control.

No! "Perfect love casts out fear..." If we sincerely study our Bibles, will God not help us to build up our relationship with each other and with God? We actually take our Bibles **more** seriously by **not** trying to turn it into the Divine Word of God. And we also enable people outside the church to take us and our faith more seriously if we **don't** try to say that we have all the answers.

A negative start, sorry, but now I can study the kaleidoscope of meaning in: 'the word of God'.

Paul Bev. 6.3.20

*Dictionaries – Easton's Bible Dictionary – Word of God*

#### **Word of God [N]**

(Hebrews 4:12 , etc.). The Bible, so called because the writers of its several books were God's organs in communicating his will to men. It is his "word" because he speaks to us in its sacred pages. Whatever the inspired writers here declare to be true and binding upon us, God declares to be true and binding. This word is infallible, because written under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and therefore free from all error of fact or doctrine or precept. (See INSPIRATION; BIBLE.) All saving knowledge is obtained from the word of God. In the case of adults it is an indispensable means of salvation, and is efficacious thereunto by the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit (John 17:17; 2 Tim John 3:15; John 3:16; 1 Peter 1:23).

[I'm guessing the bit I highlighted should have said: 2 Tim 3:16.17.]

## ***117 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly***

All through this journey, I've tried to be positive, not so much to speak against things that I think are unhelpful in the Christian tradition that I've received, but to focus on the glorious positives I've been discovering.

It's been an eye-opener to see 'the gospel' not as the mechanism by which we are saved, but as the good news about Jesus, the message of Jesus, his life, death, resurrection and ascension – who he is, what he's done, how he's conquered sin – a vast wealth of wonderful things, all summed up in the one word 'gospel'.

So yesterday, having cleared the ground that 'the word of God' does not mean 'the Bible', I started to look at the New Testament use of word of God/word of the Lord/word of Christ (38/10/2 times) – what a joy it was to read all of those Scriptures (reproduced below).

So did my Bible study bring any startling revelations to me? No, not really. I did note that it was largely verbal: speaking, preaching, proclaiming and hearing, listening to, accepting, receiving. Also, I saw that you could sometimes read it as almost personal – the 'word of God' as a person. Well, the Word of God *is* a person; it's Jesus.

I was reminded by a friend's feedback response yesterday that I am in danger of over-analysing (referring to my insistence that I had found two 'mistakes' in the Gospels), but I think that is the spirit of the age, to which I am succumbing, despite my best efforts.

But I'm trying to release myself from over-defining things, as this can so easily rob us of the wealth of meaning that God has for us. But interestingly, I've just realised that my two 'definitions' have come together:

the gospel = the message about Jesus

the word of God = the message about Jesus

In fact, if you read all the occurrence of 'the word of God' below, you could read them, instead, as 'the gospel' without hardly changing the meaning.

Paul Bev. 8.3.20

Matthew 15 5 But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,’ 6 he is not to ‘honour his father [or his mother]’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.

Luke 3 1. In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene- 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John

Luke 5 1. One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding round him and listening to the word of God,

Luke 8 11 “This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God.

Luke 11 28 He replied, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”

John 10 34 Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are gods’? 35 If he called them ‘gods’, to whom the word of God came – and the Scripture cannot be broken – 36 what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, ‘I am God’s Son’? 37 Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does.

Acts 2 30 Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” 31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

Acts 6 1. In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. 2 So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. 3 Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” 6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. 7 So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Acts 8 14. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. 15 When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit,

Acts 11 1. The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

Acts 12 24 But the word of God continued to increase and spread.

Acts 13 5 When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues.

— 7 The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God.

— 45 When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. 46 Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.

Acts 17 13 When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up.

Acts 18 11 So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

1Corinthians 14 36. Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?

2Corinthians 2 17 Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.

2Corinthians 4 1. Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. 2 Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. 3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.

Ephesians 6 17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Philippians 1 14 Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

Colossians 1 5 the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel 6 that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.

— 25 I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fulness- 26 the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints.

1Thessalonians 2 13. And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

1Timothy 4 4 For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, 5 because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

Titus 2 4 Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, 5 to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no-one will malign the word of God.

Hebrews 4 12 For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Hebrews 6 4 It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5 who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, 6 if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

Hebrews 13 6 So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" 7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

1Peter 1 23 For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. 24 For, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, 25 but the word of the Lord stands for ever." And this is the word that was preached to you.

1John 2 14 I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

Revelation 1 1. The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who testifies to everything he saw – that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.



— 9. I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Revelation 6 9. When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.

Revelation 19 13 He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God.

Revelation 20 4 ... And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God.

Acts 8 25 When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.

Acts 13 44 On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.

— 48 When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. 49 The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.

Acts 15 35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

Acts 16 30 He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” 31 They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.” 32 Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.

Acts 19 10 This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

— 20 In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

1Peter 1 24. For, “All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, 25 but the word of the Lord stands for ever.” And this is the word that was preached to you.

Ephesians 1 13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession – to the praise of his glory.

Colossians 1 3. We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints- 5 the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel 6 that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth.

2Timothy 2 15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

James 1 17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. 18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

Romans 10 17 Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

Colossians 3 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

## 118 The logic of original sin

It was almost a year ago that I raised the issue of original sin <sup>[71]</sup>. I agree that it's not a simple issue, but here's my thinking.

As it was handed to me, unless an individual repents and turns to Christ, accepting him as their personal saviour, then their fate is sealed: they will not be in the kingdom when Jesus returns.

Right, so let's apply some logic to this. **How** do you repent and turn to Christ? You need to understand about original sin, that you are inherently evil; then you need to understand how Jesus' death was efficacious for your salvation; then you need to understand what it means to repent; and finally you must pray to ask God to forgive you and you will receive the Holy Spirit.

OK, so the logic of that, it seems to me, is that as soon as we can, we **must** instill into our children their inherent sinfulness, otherwise they might end up in hell because we didn't tell them – and you know what Jesus said about anyone who causes one of these little ones to stumble!

And what about the baby that's very sick and likely to die? Can we, should we, do anything to help that individual not end up in hell?

Not easy, is it? But the mistake I think we're making, when we talk like this, is to see life individualistically instead of in terms of community, and to see it in terms of in/out, true/false mechanisms, rather than relationships.

I don't know when, historically, we moved to this sort of thinking, but my Bible readings and studies suggest to me that in the early church they held onto the Jewish ideas of covenant, of belonging, of community. I don't believe that the early church taught their children that they were miserable sinners.

Paul Bev. 9.3.20

Matthew 18 1. At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 2 He called a little child and had him stand among them. 3 And he said: "I tell you the truth, **unless YOU change and become like little children, YOU will never enter the kingdom of heaven.** 4 Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. 6 But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

## 119 What is God NOT like?

This week, a friend has expressed continuing concern about the picture of God portrayed in the Old Testament. Yes, we can all see the expressions of God's love and constant (unmerited) forgiveness, but still we see in the Old Testament a fair amount about God's wrath and vengeance.

My friend's particular concern was the plagues, and especially so, given the absolutely central place that the exodus has in Jewish thinking, life, culture and tradition, and how this was taken up and amplified in its significance in the New Testament, e.g. the Lord's Supper.

As I told my friend, I don't have an 'answer' but here's my thinking this morning:

- What is God like? God is like Jesus. And God is like the loving Father that Jesus spoke about to his first hearers – like that wonderful prodigal father who loved *both* his sons!

- God wants, by any and every means, in any and every age, to *communicate that love*.
- God *uses people* in every age to express that love in word and action.
- God inspired Abraham, Moses, David and the prophets, to communicate that love in spoken word and in action, and then inspired people to write some words down for later generations.

(To give a sense of scale, rough dates are: Abraham 2000 BC, Moses 1500 BC, David 1000 BC, prophets 800–400 BC, then Jesus, 2000 years ago, and within 30–40(?) years, the NT writings.)

- God came to earth, in person, and showed God’s love in words and actions.
- God inspired people to communicate that love, in words and actions, going out from Jerusalem, and the good news of Jesus spread like wildfire.
- God inspired some people to write letters to one another, some of which have been preserved.
- God inspired some people to write careful accounts of Jesus’ life and teachings, some of which have been preserved.
- God inspired some church leaders to get together and work out which of the letters and writings (Gospels) were most trustworthy.
- God has continued to inspire people to communicate that love in words and actions, often using the inspired words of the Old and New Testaments to prompt them.
- God has inspired people to (interpret and then) translate those writings into loads of other languages.

Fine, but how does this trail of inspiration help my friend to come to terms with his plagues?

Well, God’s got a bit of a problem! God wants to communicate his love to both (a) the people at the time of speaking/writing and (b) people in the centuries and millennia following, to the end of time.

Do you see the massive problem God has got? The worldview of people all those thousands of years ago was so very different from our own – it has gradually changed, century by century, and all the while, God has been trying desperately to draw us closer into loving relationship, and to enable us to more effectively live together in love.

So God worked hard on humankind, to gradually civilise us – although, looking around, there’s still a lot of work for God to do – but let’s take an example. How did God change our worldview into realising that although slavery had been the norm for millennia, it was actually wrong? If slavery is wrong, why doesn’t the NT say, “Thus sayeth the Lord, slavery is evil. Stop it! Now!”

Sorry but that wouldn’t work. God has had to be more subtle and *gradually* change our minds.

But let’s now look at this from a different perspective. Let’s try to see how *not* to understand what God wants. I really thank God for inspiring the Pharisees! They have such a good example and inspiration to me for 50 years. :-)

They earnestly and diligently studied their (OT) Bibles, to find out what God wanted, so where and how did they (according to Jesus) get it so spectacularly wrong?! I think they probably took it all too literally, and just used it to work out exactly what was right and wrong: what you had to do to avoid being cast into hell by God.

“You duffers!” said Jesus, “The purpose of the (OT) Bible is to teach you about ME! about God!”

So when we read the Bible, I think we have to remember that humankind is on a journey; God is trying to show us, century by century, how better to live with one another in love.

Now, the various bits of the Bible were written by fallible humans *of their own time*, and they said it as they saw it – albeit under God’s inspiration. So when we read what they wrote, we have to look for the underlying message, and not be put off by the brutal worldview of the writers.

And I now realise just how important it is to decide whether the Scriptures are *inspired* or *infallible /inerrant*. If the latter, then when the OT writer says, ‘God sent the angel of death, who killed all the firstborn of the Egyptians’, then that is *exactly* what God did.

No, sorry, I don’t believe that! That’s not ‘WWJD’. That’s how they *interpreted* God’s actions, according to their own worldview.

One final illustration of how Jesus interpreted the Old Testament: In Luke 4:16-20 he quotes from Isaiah, and says ‘Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing’. Let’s check Isaiah 61:2. Look! Jesus’ quotation was deliberately partial. Jesus ends mid-sentence with ‘*to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour*’, but the sentence continues with ‘*...the day of vengeance of our God*’!

God doesn’t change over the millennia, but *our view of God* (thankfully) changes, and we realise more and more and more just how loving and forgiving God is. God is not here to condemn *anyone*; God wants *everyone* to come to repentance – to turn and see God the all-loving Trinity.

Paul Bev. 14.3.20

## ***120 Buy a virtual dog!***

Yesterday, my friend, Jane sent a lovely encouraging email to a load of her friends saying that we should “get singing”, and sending a YouTube clip of her current favourite worship song, and saying:

These are challenging times for all of us... but these things are sure...

God is still God!

God is still **good!**

God doesn’t inflict corona virus on us...

God will turn what is meant to harm us into something good!

Definitely! If we believe in a God whose main purpose is to restore, renew, redeem, then our job as people of faith is to be encouragers, like Jane. So let’s all pray to God for ideas as to how we can encourage other people.

Some key workers, such as health workers, are going to be working themselves to a standstill, so maybe there’s something we can do to help and support them.

And many people, especially older folks and those with health issues, may be stuck at home, lonely and with not much to occupy them – not a good combination. How can we help them?

Many of us, though, will have time on our hands, and aren’t confined to base (I’m only **just** over 69), so I was thinking this morning of what I/we could do to encourage others.

I mean, obviously, we can offer to do shopping for people, give extra food to the FoodBank, and why not follow Jane’s idea of sending friends a worship song?

But one idea I’ve just had is to buy a virtual dog (they cost virtually nothing!). Dogs, of course, need taking out for walks, at least once a day, maybe twice. And when I (well, we, if Sue’s willing to follow my bonkers idea) take Fido out for his walk, I’m going to smile and say hello to everyone I meet, maybe ask them, “Are you OK?” and be willing to stop and chat (keeping my distance). And I’ll pray to be given something positive to say, rather than falling into the trap of moaning about “the awful situation”.

And how do we follow the writer of Hebrews (below), given that even church services have been cancelled? Well, what about using Zoom? The weekly lunchtime prayer group that I started in my tiny attic office in Upper King

Street, Norwich in 1984 is still going (though someone else has kept it running since I went off in the wilderness), and we're going to try praying by Zoom today.

If you love God and you know that God loves you then your smile can lift someone else – something I discovered big-time on my solo cycle ride in 2015. A quote from (I think) Ignatius has stayed with me: “You are a link in a chain, a bond of connection between people.” You don't know how a smile and a kind word can just lift someone's spirits at a time they need it.

Bless you all!

Paul Bev. 20.3.20

Heb 10:19 **Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence** to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup>by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, <sup>21</sup>and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup>let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. <sup>23</sup>Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. <sup>24</sup>**And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup>not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another**—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

## 121 Hallelujah, I'm saved!

*Does God love the world?* Of course! “God **SO** loved the world...”

*Did God send Covid19?* No, of course not! Not the God I see in Jesus.

*So, did the devil send Covid19?* No, that's not the point!

*Does God want us to learn something from Covid19?* Now we're getting somewhere!

*Does God want Christians to learn something from Covid19?* Well, yes, maybe, but God so loved **the whole world**. So, I think that God wants **the world** to learn that at any and every level of society we must learn to live as a mutually supportive community. If we don't, the planet won't survive. Well, it will, but humankind won't.

If we try to grab the “resources that are ours” and fight off anyone who tries to take them from us – e.g. if we fill our freezers and our larders with food, so that poorer people starve – then we won't be around much longer as a species.

There are enough resources to go around, but only if we – at **every level**: local communities, countries, and a whole world – learn to care and share, to live as a mutually supportive community.

So, are we as Christians failing to lead the way? Well, we probably shouldn't be too hard on ourselves – Christians have been, and are, involved in caring for others. But I wonder if, **spiritually**, we live by the same selfish paradigm that could see the end of the human species? What do I mean?

The Christian model that I was brought up with was that what **really** matters is **personal salvation**, whether I am saved or not. Oh, sure, we're selfless in our evangelism – we go out and try to “tell people the Gospel”, i.e. convince them that we have the truth, the ‘answer’. And then sometimes, because “some people” don't get it right, we have to split off from them and form a different church, and then another different church, and another different church.

*Paul, you're being too negative. Surely, maintaining the purity of God's truth is important. “The devil is prowling around, like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”* Well, yes, to an extent, but I would have thought that Satan has been able to devour more people by our (i.e. Christians') **wrong attitudes** than by our having the wrong theology. If you go around and talk to “people on the street” (not that we can, at the moment), how many will say

that they or their parents used to go to church but... [you can fill in the reason(s) here]? And how much of what has put people off was well-meaning Christians who were trying to tell them “what was right”? We really must not underestimate the importance of our attitudes to other people.

Personally, I prefer to err on the side of inclusion, of working together, regardless of my neighbour’s exact theology. If it’s important for us Christians to model **anything** in these dark days, it’s community, inclusion, cooperation, and not spiritually stockpiling “the truth”.

You know, I’ve often wondered what the heck Jesus meant by his parable of the wheat and the weeds. And having just re-read it (Mt 13:24-30), I’ve noticed that it follows **immediately** on from Jesus’ explanation of the parable of the sower (18-23), and I think maybe that’s **not** a coincidence.

I vividly remember our Rachel’s sermon on the parable of the sower: What a useless farmer, she said. Why didn’t he carefully and deliberately put the seed only in the **good** soil? Surely, a decent farmer can easily tell the difference between good soil, a path, a rocky area and a bunch of thorns! But God is a **prodigal** farmer (as well as the prodigal father I keep harping on about) who bungs the seed willy-nilly anywhere and everywhere. God is so **desperate** to reach **everyone** that the seed will be cast everywhere, even if there’s only the **slightest** chance of it growing.

And so then comes the parable of the weeds; isn’t it saying the same sort of thing? Don’t fuss about rooting out anything that looks like a weed, anything that’s not quite “right”. If you do, you might root out a perfectly good shoot of corn!

I’m not saying that theology’s a waste of time (if it were, I’d have been wasting a **lot** of time this past couple of years), but what does almost everyone say about St Ed’s, and why do people who don’t actually attend the church talk about “our church”? Well, they say “It’s such a welcoming church – such lovely people.”

Sorry, but I think my attitude to others is far more important than being right.

Bless you all! Stay safe!

Paul Bev. 24.3.20

## ***122 Sin as Love rejected!***

Sadly, I’ve had a spiritually dry and difficult Lent. Why? I stupidly decided to give up reading ‘spiritual books’ for Lent, and only read the Bible – that way I thought I’d get some sort of ‘pure’ view of my faith – just me and God. *Stupid boy!* It was compounded by lockdown, so that even the emergence from Lent into Easter didn’t restore my joy. ‘Which part of “*It’s not good for man to be alone*” did you not understand, Paul!’

So I’ve joined an email-based Bible study on 1 John, and our Revd Phil has produced a superb set of notes and questions on 1 John, in which he’s bubbling over with enthusiasm about the amazing love that God has for us – he just can’t help himself. (Deliberate ambiguity: Did I mean Phil or John? Yes, both!)

Aided by Phil’s notes, and as I did with my studies in Romans, I took what I call my drone-based view of the book, flying over the whole book – and I got very excited by the panorama!

The book was written to counter false teachings that were creeping into the church. In particular, they were watering down the seriousness of sin. (“*If we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*”) If you view the whole text of 1 John, and highlight the words ‘sin’ and ‘love’, you will see that the two are intertwined throughout the whole book. (See page 3.) And that’s what has got me so excited again.

Now, if we’re to understand 1 John – well, any book in the Bible – we have to first work out how the original readers understood it – it’s a letter written to some real people, after all.

The context has to be a Jewish one – Jesus was a Jew – and the Jews knew their history. They knew that, over the centuries, God had desperately tried to get his people to live in relationship with him – in covenant. Time and again, they turned away from God, going their own way rather than following God’s loving instructions as to how to live in love with him.

Time and again, God allowed them to experience the exile (both spiritual and physical/actual) that follows from their having decided to live *outside* that loving covenant relationship. And time and again, God forgave them and drew them back into relationship, into covenant. If you read the Old Testament as a whole, it’s amazing how forgiving God is, despite his people’s wilfulness.

And that’s how the people of Jesus’ time, of John’s time, saw sin: it was rejecting the loving, forgiving God who longed for you to return and, if you did return, he would wipe away that sin and give you a new start – again! How gracious God is! How amazing! What incredible love!

And that is the context into which John writes, that’s why, throughout the book, love and sin are so intertwined: Sin is really, really serious, says John, because we’re spitting in the face of God, the face of the God who loves us so desperately. Would you spit in the face of your wife or husband?! That’s the seriousness of sin.

In the children’s group I helped with at my former church, they said that SIN stood for “Shove off, God! I’m in charge! No to your ways!

And that’s why the gospel – the good news of Jesus – is so amazingly wonderful! and you, like me, know how wonderful the love of Jesus really is, in dying for us on the cross to take away our sin. And you, like me, want to share that love with those you love – your friends, and the unbelieving members of your own family. So how are we going to do that? How are we going to draw them into that loving relationship with God?

If we believe what we’ve always been taught, this is what we have to do. We have to “tell them the gospel”. And what is the gospel? Ask any well-educated Christian, and they’ll tell you what your loved ones need to understand – something like this:

God is holy and perfect, but we are unholy and sinful; every day we think and say and do wrong things. So, clearly, we’re not able to approach God – there’s a vast gulf that we cannot cross. But God loves us **so much** that he came to the earth in Jesus, was tortured and killed to take the punishment that we deserve for our sins. He went through hell, so we don’t have to. Because Jesus took the punishment, we can be set free. Hallelujah!

This is what we refer to as ‘penal substitution’, and some churches (many churches? most churches?) have this as their primary means of understanding the work of Jesus on the cross. But I wonder what the author of “the epistle of love” would think of that way of presenting “the gospel”? (I’ll hand over now to John, and let him finish this article...)

*Your “penal substitution” idea is a new one to me, but it seems that it waters down sin: it turns it into a mere transgression against God’s laws, rather than spitting in God’s face.*

*Also, it seems to present God as needing to be appeased (like the ‘gods’ of the tribes around us). We all know that Yahweh – as all the Scriptures (= OT) make clear – is a loving, forgiving God, not a tyrant, needing someone to be punished!*

*No! On the cross, God in Jesus takes our spitting, self-centredness and triumphs over it, washing it away by his love.*

*After the resurrection, when Jesus spoke to Peter and asked if he really loved him. That was hard for him – really, really hard! Yes, of course he loved him, but ... well, you know ... it’s so hard not to let selfishness overcome us – that’s the **real** sin.*

*Our friend Jesus bore all that suffering for me, and yet, so often, I feel I couldn’t be bothered. And when I’m like that, I’m saying that what he did for me wasn’t really important; I’m spitting in my beloved friend’s face. How*

*could I DO that?! But that's the awfulness of sin. No! Let's be real here:* If we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

Bless you all! Stay safe!

Paul Bev. 30.4.20



This text is actually my discussion with Jesus in John 21, plus my first epistle. Jx.

John 21

1. Afterwards Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way:  
2 Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together.  
3 "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.  
4 Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.  
5 He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered.  
6 He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net because of the large number of fish.  
7 Then the disciple whom Jesus **love**, said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water.  
8 The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards.  
9 When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.  
10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught."  
11 Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn.  
12 Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord.  
13 Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.  
14 This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.  
15 When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly **love** me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I **love** you," Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."  
16 Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly **love** me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I **love** you," Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

17 The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you **love** me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you **love** me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I **love** you," Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."  
18 I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and wore where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go."  
19 Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"  
20 Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus **love** was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?")  
21 When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?"  
22 Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."  
23 Because of this, the rumor spread among the brethren that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?"  
24 This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true.  
25 Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

1 John 1

1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched <sup>19</sup> this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.  
2 The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.  
3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.  
4 We write this to make our joy complete.  
5 This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.  
6 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all **sin**.  
7 If we claim to be without **sin**, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.  
8 If we confess our **sins**, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our **sins** and purify us from all unrighteousness.  
9 If we claim to have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.  
1 John 2

1 My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not **sin**. But if anybody does **sin**, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense <sup>19</sup> Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.  
2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our **sins**, and not only for our but also for the **sins** of the whole world.  
3 We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.  
4 The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what his commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him.  
5 But if anyone obeys his word, God's **love** is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him.  
6 Whoever claims to love him must walk as Jesus did.  
7 Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard.  
8 For I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.  
9 Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness.  
10 Whoever **love** his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble.  
11 But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.  
12 I write to you, dear children, because your **sins** have been forgiven an account of Jesus' name.  
13 I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father.  
14 I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.  
15 Do not **love** the world or anything in the world. If anyone **love** the world, the **love** of the Father is not in him.  
16 For everything in the world <sup>19</sup> the cravings of **sinful** men, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does <sup>20</sup> comes not from the Father but from the world.  
17 The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives for ever.  
18 Dear children, this is the last hour, and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.  
19 They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.  
20 But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth.

21 I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth.  
22 Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist <sup>19</sup> he denies the Father and the Son.  
23 No-one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.  
24 See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father.  
25 And this is what he promised us <sup>19</sup> even eternal life.  
26 I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray.  
27 As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit <sup>19</sup> just as it has taught you, remains in him.  
28 And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.  
29 If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him.  
1 John 3

1 How great is the **love** the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.  
2 Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.  
3 Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.  
4 Everyone who **sins** breaks the law; in fact, **Sin** is lawlessness!

4 Everyone who **sins** breaks the law; in fact, **Sin** is lawlessness.  
5 But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our **sins**. And in him is no **sin**.  
6 No-one who lives in him keeps on **sinning**. No-one who continues to **sin** has either seen him or known him.  
7 Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, but on him is no guilt.  
8 He who does what is **sinful** is of the devil, because the devil has been **sinning** from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.  
9 No-one who is born of God will continue to **sin**, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on **sinning**, because he has seen the Son of God.  
10 This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not **love** his brother.  
11 This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should **love** one another.  
12 Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous.  
13 Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.  
14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we **love** our brothers. Anyone who does not **love** remains in death.  
15 Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.  
16 This is how we know what **love** is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

17 If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the **love** of God be in him?  
18 Dear children, let us not **love** with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.  
19 This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence:  
20 whatever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.  
21 Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God.  
22 And receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.  
23 And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to **love** one another as he commanded us.  
24 Those who obey his commands live in him, and he is in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gives us.  
1 John 4  
1 Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.  
2 This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.  
3 But every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and now is already in the world.  
4 Yes, dear children, one from God and love everyone there, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.  
5 They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.  
6 We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.  
7 Dear friends, let us **love** one another, for **love** comes from God. Everyone who **love** has been born of God and knows God.  
8 Whoever does not **love** does not know God, because God is **love**.

9 This is how God showed his **love** among us: The son he sent into the world that we might live through him.  
10 This is **love**: not that we **love** God, but that he **love** us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our **sins**.  
11 Dear friends, since God so **love** us, we also ought to **love** one another.  
12 No-one has ever seen God; but if we **love** one another, God lives in us and his **love** is made complete in us.  
13 We know that we love in him and he is in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.  
14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.  
15 If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he is in God.  
16 And so we know and rely on the **love** God has for us. God is **love**. Whoever lives in **love** lives in God, and God is in him.  
17 In this way, **love** is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him.

18 There is no fear in **love**; the perfect **love** drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in **love**.  
19 We **love** because he first **love** us.  
20 If anyone says, "I **love** God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not **love** his brother, whom he has seen, cannot **love** God, whom he has not seen.

21 And he has given us this command: Whoever **love** God must also **love** his brother.  
1 John 5  
1 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who **love** the Father **love** his child as well.  
2 This is how we know that we **love** the children of God: by **loving** God and carrying out his commands.  
3 This is **love** for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome,  
4 for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.  
5 Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.  
6 This is the one who came by water and blood <sup>19</sup> Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.  
7 For there are three that testify [in heaven: the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit], and these three are one. [8] And there are three that testify on earth: [the Spirit, the water and the blood], and these three are in agreement.  
9 We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son.  
10 Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son.  
11 And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.  
12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.  
13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.  
14 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.  
15 And if we know that he hears us <sup>19</sup> whenever we ask <sup>20</sup> we know that we have what we asked of him.  
16 If anyone sees his brother commit a **sin** that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life.  
16b I refer to those whose **Sin** does not lead to death. There is a **Sin** that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that.  
17 All wrongdoing is **Sin**, and there is **Sin** that does not lead to death.

18 We know that anyone born of God does not continue to **Sin**: the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.  
19 We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.  
20 We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true <sup>19</sup> even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.  
<sup>20</sup> These children honor him who sent them, but they do not love him who sent them, and they do not believe in Jesus Christ, whom the Father has sent into the world. They are denying the Father who has sent his Son into the world, and they will receive his punishment.  
21 Whoever receives a brother who does not bring this teaching into his home and does not greet him, anyone who receives such a brother or greets him shares in all the evil deeds that he does.

## 123 Jehovah Jireh, our provider

This is an old testimony, but I think you'll find it encouraging...

In late 1990, our business was expanding, and so we bought a two-storey building in order to accommodate that expansion, and in our best year, we turned over just shy of a million pounds. However, the tide suddenly turned, and by 1992 we were in real trouble – that year we made a **loss** of £32,000. Clearly, I was never really cut out to be a “big businessmen”.

Have you ever created a timeline of your life? I recommend it. I started one about 30 years ago, and keeping it has been really helpful: Sue and I have looked back and seen how God has worked through the different stages of our life together. On my timeline, 1993 has just one big entry: “The Depression”.

That depression felt very severe to me, but I'm sure it wasn't, by comparison with what others have to endure. Anyway, we had to make all the staff redundant, but even so we were stuck with the business premises, in negative equity. The mortgage – plus the business rates – meant that we were likely lose our house. Then I heard that an uncle, who lived in a penthouse in New York, had left me 10% of his estate. We were saved – or so I thought! In fact, it didn't materialise for several years and was rather less than anticipated. However, God had other plans.

In 1984, when I started my own business, in a one-room rented office, a few friends who worked in the city came round one lunchtime a week, for sandwiches and prayer. Interestingly, that meeting has continued unbroken (albeit with a few different people) for 36 years, plus I didn't attend it for my several spiritual wilderness years. However, my friend Colin kept it going, and even the virus hasn't stopped it – five of us have met regularly for ‘Friday prayers’ by Zoom.

Anyway, back in 1993, our group (which has included, for the past 32 years, my financial advisor) was praying for our desperate financial situation. One lunchtime, as I was coming back from the shops, there was a beautiful rainbow covering the office. That Friday, I told my friends about the rainbow, and said I felt that God was saying, “Don't panic! I've got it all in hand.”

A month or so later, a family friend died. I had agreed to be her executor, and when I went to read the will, there didn't appear to be any major beneficiaries. “Where does the residue go?” I asked the solicitor. “Oh, it's for you,” she said. We had absolutely no idea about this! Actually, we were thankful for our ignorance, because Sue had visited her often, and in the latter years, she got very, very difficult, but Sue persevered. If we had known that we were the principal beneficiaries, it might have been quite difficult.

Anyway, that money – from the sale of her house when she went into care a few years earlier – saved us! And the office was eventually sold.

But that isn't the end of the story. When I got the news from the solicitor, I rang my financial advisor, and told him about the legacy.

“That's amazing!” he said. “Last night, I was working on one of my portfolios: the lady had died, and I was finalising her account. I realised that it had been exemplary: we had built it really well. But I said to myself that those funds would now go to another financial advisor to manage.”

Not so! That money was simply transferred to the portfolio of another of his clients – us! And, yes, the lady in question was our friend.

But there's one more piece of the jigsaw.

It was then that I remembered about that rainbow. I saw it after I had been to the shops to buy some flowers – freesias. Why? Because a good friend of ours had just had a stroke, and we understood that the sense of smell was a faculty that often continues after others have failed. And yes, it was the self-same friend – Sue knew that the freesias were her favourite flowers.

I hope that encourages you as much as it encourages me, each time I tell the story!

Paul Bev. 17.5.20

## 124 What is God NOT like? Part 2

Four months ago, when I wrote “119 What is God NOT like?”, I was grappling yet again with the very difficult issue of the disparity between the wonderful picture of the loving, self-sacrificing, enemy-embracing God who is seen in Jesus, with the frankly ugly God I see portrayed in the Old Testament. (If you’ve read the OT more widely recently, I’m sure you’ll agree that it’s not a pretty sight – God apparently commanding genocide, human mutilation, animal sacrifice, etc.)

If we want to believe in Jesus, we have to accept, I think, that Jesus thought the Old Testament (i.e. his Bible) was divinely inspired: “he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24). And Paul agrees: “All Scripture is God-breathed...” (2 Tim 3).

In that earlier article, I tried to say that we have to understand what is written in the OT in terms of the beliefs and practices of the ancient Near East, to read it in its historical context. But frankly, I was struggling. The nasty stuff about God in the OT simply won’t go away; it doesn’t make sense; it doesn’t fit with the loving Jesus; yet Jesus didn’t reject the OT. Help!

Then, through my contacts within the editing community, I ‘met’ a lady in Vancouver. We got talking more widely, and she said she was a Christian who, like me, had been wrestling with her faith. “What authors have you been reading?” I asked, and she introduced me to Greg Boyd, a theologian who has written several books.

I looked on YouTube and found a dialogue between Greg Boyd and Bruxy Cavey (he of the “Gospel in chairs” video). It was incredibly intense and difficult to follow, as the two powerful intellects tackled some very pertinent theological issues for the church in the 21st century, but I understood enough to realise that this was someone I needed to read.

I bought “Cross Vision: How the crucifixion of Jesus makes sense of Old Testament violence”, and I read the spoiler at the beginning – fascinating! (It’s the bit that you can read on Amazon.) But then I didn’t read it, I think because I was in the spiritual doldrums – I had lost focus.

Eventually, I started reading it. Amazing! Here at last was what I had been looking for. No, not “answers”, but at least a genuine, honest grappling with the issues that I’ve referred to above.

I guess I’ve been feeling right through all of this that the church has got it all terribly wrong – we’ve become very un-Jesus-like – and I’ve been wondering where, when and how did it go wrong? The feeling I’ve had was that it was as long ago as the early centuries of the church’s life; Greg Boyd seems to agree, and is proposing what I would almost call a New Reformation.

I’ve read less than half of the book, but the “Yes, yes!” count is as high as it was three years ago (and 120,000+ written words ago), when I read “The Divine Dance”. I don’t think you’ve heard the last from me about Greg Boyd!

*Thank you, Lord, for the gracious way you deal with us, leading us a step at a time. I pray that we may have courage to walk with you, whatever the cost – to walk where Jesus walked, and see things as Jesus saw them. Amen!*

Paul Bev. 10.7.20

## 125 Greg Boyd spoiler

You can read the spoiler for Greg Boyd's 'Cross Vision: How the crucifixion of Jesus makes sense of Old Testament violence' on the Amazon website but here I'll anglicise and personalise it.

Imagine I'm walking along a busy, noisy main road in a city, and I spot Sue walking along in the same direction on the other side of the road. It's too noisy to shout at her, and she seems engrossed in her thoughts – I'll catch her up at the intersection, but I watch her.

She comes towards a man sitting, begging, with his dog beside him and his tin outstretched. I'm wondering how she'll react. Will she give him some money? or smile at him and talk to him?

Suddenly she starts screaming at him, shouting something – I can't catch what. She knocks the tin out of his hand, sending the money scattering across the pavement, and she kicks the dog, sending it scampering down the road.

What is going on?!

Could it be some kind of weird psychological experiment to see the reaction of passers-by? Could it be a Candid Camera stunt? (So I look around and can't see a camera trained on me.)

I've been married to Sue for 47 years, and clearly I know enough of her character; she simply wouldn't do that. She wouldn't behave in that way. *Something is going on here!* I don't know what, but something.

I have to understand what is going on in terms of what I know of Sue's character; there must be an explanation. My eyes didn't deceive me; I saw what I saw, so how do I understand this and how do I interpret what's going on?

(Apologies to Greg Boyd, but I think that's the essence of what he says at the beginning of his book.)

*Lord Jesus, we've seen how you cared for people and loved people while you were on earth. We know you gave your very life for us, you bore our sins to give us new life. And we want to share that wonderful good news, but when our friends and families read the Old Testament, their eyes are blinded by Satan, so they can't (won't?) see the Father's love that pours out of almost every page. All they can see is a warrior God smiting all Israel's enemies, a prejudiced God who thinks men are way more important than women ('thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife', or any of his other possessions), that commands homosexuals to be stoned to death.*

*Please help us the refind the 'good' in the Good News that swept the known world in those few short years after the resurrection. In Jesus' name, and for Jesus' sake. Amen!*

Paul Bev. 11.7.20

## 126 The Good News just got gooder!

Even at page 160 of Greg Boyd's 255pp 'Cross Vision', I'm incredibly excited by what it's showing me. GB is a very theological chap, and this book, as I understand it, is a sort of lay person's guide to what he has written in his 1445pp, two-volume opus, 'The Crucifixion of the Warrior God', based on his 10 years of study.

Here, I'll try to explain why I believe that GB's view is the *paradigm shift* that I've been looking for these past three years.

Our problem is that we're viewing things from 2020, and we already know, having seen Jesus' self-sacrificial life, death and resurrection, that God is incredibly loving, and desperately wants to forgive and heal and restore the whole human race. But it wasn't always as clear to see.

Think back 4100 years, and put yourself in God's shoes. You want to show people of all nations just how much you love them, and to draw them into a loving relationship with you. But you have a problem – a very BIG problem!

Ask any historian of religion about the ancient Near East (ANE), and they'll tell you that every single religion saw God/god/the gods as remote, powerful, punishing and controlling, and the only way to have enough to eat and not have all your children die young was to make offerings to your deity, but if you didn't do as you were told, it/he/they would punish you.

You (God) want to convince people *what you're really like*, so you look around for someone who might be receptive to seeing things differently, and you spot Abram and Sarai, who have been trying to talk to you because, unhappily, they don't have any children (11).<sup>12</sup> So you ask them to leave their homeland (12), trusting you to show them where to go, and you promise them that they will become a great nation. Against all the odds, they trust you and step out in faith. Your plan seems to be working!

Sadly, they do a couple of devious things (12), and they have a few adventures on the journey (13, 14), but you send them another messenger, Melchizedek (14). Then their faith in you wavers, so you repeat your promise of making them a great nation (15). Their faith in you wavers again (16) and they try to manipulate the situation, so you again repeat your promise (17) – you even go and visit them yourselves (sic) as three visitors, but Sarah doubts again (18). They have some problems and there's a natural disaster (19) which, as true ANE people, they understand as you bringing punishment; and then they indulge in yet more devious behaviour (20).

It's really not going well! But you're incredibly patient and loving, so you persevere, and eventually, Abraham and Sarah become really relaxed in their trust in you; indeed, they are so relaxed that they finally conceive (21)!

In order for them to begin to see *what you're really like*, you have to wean them off their ANE ways, which is difficult because it's so ingrained in their thinking, so you tell Abraham to go off and sacrifice his beloved, long-awaited son Isaac as a burnt offering (22). What?!!

Why in heaven's name did Abraham – even for one *second* – agree to do this? (I wonder if he told Sarah, "I'm just popping out, dear...") This is just unbelievable, isn't it? Well, maybe it's not! It just goes to show that while Abraham had great faith, he totally accepted the ANE mindset. He still had no idea *what you're really like*.

I can only suppose that Abraham thought, "Well, I trusted God and he gave me Isaac. If I continue to trust him, I guess he'll give me another son to replace Isaac." What an amazing man of faith! That's why Abraham is so special to Jews and to Christians – and I guess to Muslims, too – because he pointed the way from ANE thinking towards a faith that is based on a loving relationship.

And it's not just Abraham; the ANE mindset is there right the way through to Moses and beyond. You patiently try to wean them off, but it's a long, slow, uphill battle, to change people's views of *what you're really like*, especially as you're determined to do it only by loving influence.

What's more, the story of Abraham and the story of your centuries of patient work in trying to wean people off a sacrificial, punishment-based view had to be recorded by *people with an ANE mindset*. (Serious problem!)

Your only solution (other than lobotomising the authors) was to inspire them in their writing, so you drop hint and after hint after hint about your love. Those clues, like a trail of breadcrumbs, are laid, ready for people in later generations to follow. OK, they are hidden amidst an ANE-centred view of God, but they are there for those with the eyes to see! Truly the Scriptures are God-breathed!

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<sup>12</sup> Numbers in brackets refer to chapters of Genesis.

Imagine: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” ... And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” Hallelujah! Truly, this really is **Good News!**

All sorted now? Nope! Your job continues. All went well for the first two or three centuries, but as the church gained in power, gradually the ANE thinking began to reassert itself, and it has been used ever since to justify a punishment-based view of God.

And in the 21st century? Is it possible, like Abraham, to have *really strong faith* and yet still think of God in ANE terms? Sadly, yes, I did so for 50 years. I knew something was wrong; I was unhappy with my faith, and now I know why.

Food for thought?

Paul Bev. 14.7.20

## 127 Misusing God's power

Having now reached the penultimate chapter of Greg Boyd's '*Cross Vision*', I've experienced yet another penny-drop moment – what a wonderful journey God has been gracious enough to bring me on, these past three years! We're all different, and so this might not be a problem to you, but it's been a struggle for me, on and off, for several years.

In my 'backstory' article, 'Full circle – Reflections on 50 years as a Christian' (mid 2017, article <sup>[0]</sup> on my web page), I explained how I ended up in what was effectively a small sect. 'Harry' was a work contact, whom I brought to an Alpha course at my church; I then 'discipled' him and his wife, as we read the Scriptures together, but it soon became clear to me that he had both healing and prophetic gifts. I (and others) received physical healing at his hands, more than once, and he was able to discern things about people, which I knew to be true, having previously been churchwarden, but other people didn't know. (It turns out that he's had these gifts since he was a child.)

Later, Harry attended a 'gifts discernment' course at church, at the end of which a church leader would say to you, "We've seen that God has given you such and such gifts, so now let's see how you can use those gifts within this church." That process didn't work. I felt sad and frustrated that the church didn't seem willing and/or able to accept Harry's broad giftings and allow him to exercise them. (I now realise that the leaders' discernment was better than mine!)

Harry started leading his own Bible study group, which I attended, but it was independent of the church's study group system. After a number of years, and without my realising it, his Bible teaching gradually moved and became more and more unorthodox, but I continued to think that his gifting validated his teaching. Thankfully, one day – nine years ago now – I 'woke up' and realised what had happened! I then wrote an apologetic farewell note to Harry and immediately pulled out. I was then left with a totally empty faith – but that's another story <sup>[0]</sup>.

My struggle has been about whether Harry's gifts were God-given, or whether they were of the Evil One, because they caused so much damage in several people's lives. But they were certainly also used for good, of which I could give you a number of examples. However, there were several serious relationship issues around Harry, including broken marriages, which I won't go into. But at the time I stupidly couldn't see the damage that was being done!

Yesterday, I read chapter 16, where Greg Boyd explains his understanding, based on his cross-centred view of the Old Testament, that some people with clear God-given supernatural giftings, misused those gifts in a way that was contrary to God's will, and he gave specific examples in the lives of Moses, Elijah and Elisha. Nevertheless, God still used them, despite their obvious character flaws and the ways in which they went against God's leading. This

caused God pain, but God was sacrificially willing to use those people, in order to forward his overall plan, looking towards the fulfilment of all things in Jesus.

This is the same fundamental point that GB makes over and over again in this book: by allowing people to go against God's will, some terrible things happened (e.g. many innocent people were killed) that obviously caused God pain. But the God of the cross was willing to endure that pain, in order to draw us, inch by painful inch, to the point where we could see and receive God's love.

But we now have the New Testament and, in Christ, we see what God is truly like, so do we use spiritual gifts rightly? Clearly not! I thought that if people saw the miracles that Harry was performing, they would come to faith. Thankfully, our gracious God is redeeming my mistakes and is using them to teach me.

Teach me what, exactly?! Lots of things, but I think the most important is that being right, and knowing I was right (which I did, of course!) isn't what really matters. Indeed, it can cause real damage, as it did to my relationship with Sue. Thankfully, she stuck with me, and that relationship is being rebuilt and restored, through God's grace.

How wonderful that God inspired and used those fallible OT characters, and how wonderful that God even uses us to continue that process of self-sacrificingly spreading the love of Jesus.

What a glorious God! What an inspiring Spirit! What a beautiful Saviour and Lord!

Paul Bev. 20.7.20

## ***128 Greg Boyd is wrong!***

Just a quickie. I started looking on the internet, to see how people had reacted to Greg Boyd's book, which was, to me, such a revelation. This was prompted by a friend who sent me an article that purported to have an answer to "the problem of the wrath of God". I didn't read all 17,000 words, but what I did read was very erudite and very complicated, with lots of references.

So what did Greg Boyd's reviewers say? Basically, he was and is mistaken – some said he'd got it all wrong, others that he had some good ideas, but was still making some important errors.

These reviews too were very erudite and very complicated, with lots of references.

Two reviewers complained that GB was concentrating too much on the violence in the OT, at the expense of the love of God, which is there so strongly.

But that's the whole POINT of what GB has done for us. He has FACED the nasty bits and, I think, come up with a **simple** basic resolution that *all of us can understand*.

Have I changed my views of GB's book? No, I'm just as excited as I was before. To me, it has the ring of truth – it's just so simple. Occam's razor, is it? That the simplest solution is likely to be the best solution?

I think that the theologians (who are human, after all!) don't *want* to accept that it really could be that simple, not after the thousands of hours that some of them have spent, and all the books and papers they have written.

I'm excited because I think the solution really is that simple; yes, there are some complicated details, but the basic idea can be explained in a few words.

1) The cross shows us **exactly** what God is gloriously and wonderfully like. God is not like anything Jesus is not like. Jesus is the yardstick by which all other portraits of God should be judged.

2) The OT was written by men who had a distorted view of what God was like. They were heavily influenced by their surrounding culture. All the people of the ancient Near East saw their god/God/the gods as angry warriors that had to be appeased by sacrifice.

3) The Triune God of Jesus was gradually moderating that distorted view, showing more and more about what God was really like (a process that took hundreds and hundreds of years).

4) Graciously, at the same time, the Spirit of God *inspired* their writings, planting the seeds of what was to be fully and finally revealed in Jesus. (“These are the very Scriptures that testify about me”, Jn 5:39)

5) So where an OT author says “God told them to kill...” or “God smote...”, they are seeing God as a powerful warrior (of whom they feel they should be rightly proud) and crediting God with such things. GB’s belief is that while it hurt God to be depicted in this way (which is clearly not what Jesus is like), God nevertheless accommodated these false ideas in order, in the long run, to draw people closer and closer to the true view, in Jesus.

This is a much “nicer” view of God, and I don’t think it’s just wishful thinking on GB’s part. He has spent 10 years biblically researching this, and producing a lot of very erudite and very complicated texts, with lots of references, but his end conclusions are (something like!) what I’ve written above.

I can understand this view, I can relate to this view, I can communicate this view to my not-yet-believing friends and family, or to anyone who asks.

I perfectly understand that some theologians will find it difficult to accept that views that have been held to be true for hundreds of years might simply be wrong, but I think GB is taking us back to the beliefs of the early centuries AD.

And I also think that GB’s view will make it much easier (well, less difficult) to come to terms with suffering – but I’ll leave that for another day!

What a glorious God! What an inspiring Spirit! What a beautiful Saviour and Lord!

Paul Bev. 20.7.20

## **129 Is the Bible inspired?**

Please excuse this slightly silly imagined conversation, where someone begins by asking me...

Do you believe that the whole of the Bible is the inspired word of God? ***Yes, of course, but it depends what you mean by ‘inspired’.***

Is the whole of the Bible literally true? ***Clearly not, but that’s not a meaningful question because the Bible texts take many different forms: historic, poetic, apocalyptic, parabolic etc.***

But is the whole of the Bible true, *in some sense*? ***Well, yes, but it depends what you mean.***

Are all the words that were written down and recorded for us the exact words that God would have wanted written down? ***Interesting question.***

*I then turn the tables:*

***OK, let me ask you: Are the authors of the books of the Bible sinless?*** No, they were sinners, just like the rest of us – well, David was an author, and he even recorded some of his own terrible sins.



*So can a sinful author, whose knowledge is incomplete create a text that is completely free of errors?* Well, I suppose they *could*, but only if God supernaturally changed the words that the author was (erroneously) about to write – which I guess is approaching saying that God dictated the words.

OK, those were a few thoughts to get us started. But here are a few more genuine questions for you to consider:

- Could there be factual errors in the Bible? Would it destroy your faith if you found a few?
- Could the authors of the Bible have misunderstood the motives of God?
- Could the authors of the Bible have had a distorted view of God?
- If the authors of the Bible were fallible, can the Bible be *infallible*?

These are some of the issues that I feel have so helpfully been tackled by Greg Boyd in *Cross Vision*.

His conclusion – if I understand him correctly – is that the OT authors had a limited and distorted view of God. However, having seen God in the flesh (‘If you’ve seen me, you have seen the Father’) we now know what God is *really* like, so we’ll hopefully make fewer errors in our understanding of God than they did.

So the way that GB sees it is that our view of the OT, our interpretation of the OT, has to be based on the cross. God was willing to accommodate the OT authors’ misunderstandings, in order to draw people, in OT days and in NT days, to his love, as seen in Christ’s sacrificial death.

Our job is to interpret the OT in the light of what we *now* know about God, but which they didn’t know. We have seen the end of the story.

This passage (p56, author’s emphasis) I think sums up GB’s position:

To be clear, I affirm the traditional view that the Bible is infallible. If we trust the Bible to do what God inspired it to do, and if we are interpreting it correctly, it will not fail us. But the all-important question is, *what did God inspire the Bible to infallibly accomplish?*

If you expect the Bible to conform to contemporary standards of scientific, historical, literary, or logical perfection, I’m afraid you’re going to be greatly disappointed. God did not inspire the Bible to meet these standards. As we’ve seen, God inspired all Scripture to point us to Jesus, and more specifically, to the cross that culminates everything Jesus was about.

I found that helpful; I hope you do too.

Paul Bev. 27.7.20

## **130 Another penny-drop book**

As recommended by Colin Bearup (whom some of you will know from HT, Norwich days), I’ve just finished reading John Walton’s 2009 book, *The Lost World of Genesis One* – yes, a whole book about one chapter of the Bible – but you’ll have to admit, it’s a very significant chapter.

I’ve found it really helpful because it continues themes that have transformed my faith of late: first, that God is all about relationship – God IS relationship – and that the Bible is totally inspired, brilliantly inspired, to help people of every age come into that relationship. (That’s what started me off, three years ago, article <sup>[0]</sup>, with Richard Rohr’s *The Divine Dance*.)

The second theme echoes my previous article <sup>[129]</sup> about Greg Boyd's *Cross Vision*: the Bible was written by all-too-fallible humans, but it is *infallible* – it will not fail us, it will never fail to point us to God-in-Jesus. Great! The trouble is that, like the authors, we too are fallible, so for the Bible to achieve the purpose for which God inspired it, we must try to interpret it in the right way.

We can never be 100% sure we're interpreting it correctly, and it's important to look at how the church has traditionally interpreted things, but both Walton and Boyd have been willing to say, "Maybe the church's teaching has been wrong for hundreds of years." Some of the conclusions I have reached through this sort of dangerous rethinking have totally re-enlivened my faith.

So, Walton has looked at the Hebrew text of Genesis 1 and has asked (in particular) what does the Hebrew word that we translate as 'create' (*bara*, with some funny accents) actually mean? Again like Boyd, he insists that we should first work out what it would have meant to people of the ancient Near East (ANE) and then, from that, work out how we should apply it to now.

So how much of Walton's book can I fit into usual my target of 'under 1000 words' – I've used up over a third in this rambling intro! But let's make a start...

Some have tried to make Genesis 'acceptable' to modern scientific readers – especially in light of biological evolution – by saying that it's a purely metaphorical description of how God 'made the universe', so the six 'days' of creation could just be 'periods of time'.

Walton feels this sort of approach is pointless and unhelpful. He asks more fundamentally, what did God inspire the author of Genesis 1 to tell (his original hearers and) us?

We've got this wrong, he says, because, knowing so much more than the original hearers about the material universe, we read Genesis as if it were describing how God 'made all this stuff', and that's totally not how the people of the ANE thought about and saw the world. To them, the sky was obviously a solid dome – how else could all that water up there be held back, and only some of it be allowed through as rain? Then there's the water under the earth (which comes up in springs), hence God has to separate the water above the earth from that beneath the earth – I never understood that bit in Genesis 1 before; call me stupid!

So what does 'bara' actually mean? In English, we've translated it as 'create', but even in English 'create' can have different meanings. We could 'create' a chair, and that's clearly a set of **material** actions, but we could also (and I did) 'create' a company; that's not a material action, it's an organisational or **functional** (to use Walton's word) series of actions.

Walton's claim is that, if you look at the way 'bara' is used in the Bible and in contemporary literature it has more the meaning of 'make something work' – it's about functioning, not about materially making something, which is how our modern minds think of it.

So how might that affect our reading of Genesis 1? Long story, but let's just say that, while affirming his view that God did actually materially 'create' the universe, at some stage and in some way, he believes that's **not** what Genesis 1 is trying to tell us. Rather, we're looking at a **functional** description of creation – how it was all made to **work together** (and Genesis 2 offers another, slightly different, description). What's more, he claims that God made it all work together for the **benefit of humankind**; God wanted us not just survive, but to flourish, and to live a life relating to God.

And the other thing that struck me strongly is the repeated use of the word translated as 'good' – 'he saw that it was good', and finally, when it was all organised, 'it was **very good**'. What does the Hebrew word actually mean? I asked Colin about this, and he said that, in Hebrew more than in English, the meaning of a word is often very much affected by the context.

So, could good in Genesis 1 mean morally good as in 'knowing good and evil'? Hardly. Humans and angels can be morally good/evil, but not creation. So, let's look at the other use of good in that passage: it says of Adam 'it is not good for the man to be alone' – in other words, it just **doesn't work**. This is confirmed by modern psycho-social research into the detrimental effects of loneliness – but talk about thinking God's thoughts after him!

Maybe it's my fanciful idea, but that made sense to me: it doesn't work for us just to have enough material stuff – enough to eat and a place to live – we need to live in relationship with one another and with God – and for me, and for John Walton, is what Genesis 1 is all about.

That's enough for now; maybe I'll follow on with some of the detail of how Walton sees the six days of creation, which I found really compelling – but then that doesn't mean it's right! And beware: this book is highly contested by a good number of theologians, especially in America, I believe.

Interested to hear what you think.

Paul Bev. 14.8.20

## 131 Genesis transforms the Sabbath

I'm now reading, for a second time, John Walton's 2009 book, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, and in <sup>[130]</sup> I looked at the purpose of this account of creation. It now seems very clear to me that it was not – as we have tended to assume since the Enlightenment – to tell us about how the **universe** was **materially** created. Rather it was to tell its original hearers – and us – how God made the **cosmos** actually **function**. That understanding can change the whole way we view it.

Today, let's look at why Walton uses the first word of each of those two word pairs. Here are the OED's definitions, which serve well to illustrate the important distinction (my italic):

**universe** – *All existing matter and space considered as a whole; the cosmos.* The universe is believed to be at least 10 billion light years in diameter and contains a vast number of galaxies; it has been expanding since its creation in the Big Bang about 13 billion years ago.

**cosmos** – The universe seen as a *well-ordered* whole.

I'll look in my next article at the first six days of creation but I want here to think: What did God do on day seven? To be honest, I think I've always read it as something like: God worked hard for six days and was pretty exhausted, so on the seventh day he had a rest; therefore, we too should work hard for six days and then we should have a rest for a day – and, conveniently, that gives us the chance to go to church.

Walton's reading of Genesis transforms that into something more glorious and much more significant. The Sabbath becomes a wonderful celebration of what God has done for us – that's its purpose, not just "to have a rest". And this was true even before Jesus came along and so his resurrection makes our Sabbath even more special.

I can't go into the details of Walton's careful exegesis, but remember that it's based strongly on trying to understand the meaning of the words *as the author spoke/wrote and his hearers heard*, i.e. in the cultural context of their time, and to try hard (it's difficult) **not** to view it in terms of the culture of our time.

To get themselves inside the culture of the ancient near east (ANE) theologians can now use the growing body of ANE literature (thanks to archaeology) and our greater knowledge of ANE languages. This helps us see how they viewed their gods – and that then helps us to see the starting point from which **the** God had to lead Abram and his family into a truer appreciation of God's love for them. (How incredibly fortunate we are to be living AD, not BC – we now **know** what God is like: God is exactly like Jesus.)

So one principle that Walton notes is that the gods of the ANE had temples (though some lived atop a mountain), and the temple was where their god(s) dwelt, but they would only come and dwell in that temple if people did as they were told: the people had to provide offerings and sacrifices – food for the gods – as a condition for the gods' favour.

How different is the God that Abram knew! In the words used in Genesis 1, Walton sees that the writer presents God as having the most glorious temple that any god could ever have – the whole universe, the cosmos. The cosmos is God’s glorious temple! What’s more, that temple is set up for the **benefit of the humans**.

(Walton also shows how the *physical* temple which they eventually built echoed, in the way it was constructed, the glorious greater cosmos-temple that God had created.)

Sorry, this sounds a bit of a set of bald statements, but read the book and catch the excitement of the wonderful plan our God has – and there’s more to come...

What does God do on day seven? Our better understanding of the words used, such as the word we translate as ‘rest’, actually implies more like: God came into the universe/cosmos/temple that he had created and then God sat down at the place of power – to rule and reign, not to just have a lazy Sunday (Saturday?).

So in the functional (not material) description of Genesis 1, we see ‘creating’ as meaning more like creating a functioning company, rather than creating a material chair <sup>[130]</sup>. On day seven then, it’s as if God takes his place in the boardroom of that company; he’s there to run the company and to see it prosper – except that it’s a ‘mutual’ company, i.e. the company is run for the benefit of the humans with whom God is seeking to have a relationship. (Do you see how much of a shift in mindset this was for Abram? God really had his work cut out – still has!)

Walton suggests that, yes, God materially created the universe, but that’s not what Genesis is trying to tell us. Rather it’s about how God took the chaos and darkness of the cosmos and wonderfully made the whole thing function properly as a suitable place to put his prize creation, humankind, and then **God came to dwell** in that “temple”. So that’s something really to celebrate on the Sabbath!

Sorry, but these ideas are so different from “what we’ve always been taught” that it’s difficult to get them across in a few words. But I have such a strong feeling about it – it all makes such sense – so I would encourage you to look into it. And many biblical scholars are arguing **against** it and saying he’s mistaken. So, if like me you have a heretical streak, I would urge you to get a copy of the book.

Paul Bev. 2.9.20

## ***132 Genesis – a glorious panorama***

More thoughts based on John Walton’s book, *The Lost World of Genesis One* <sup>[130,131]</sup>.

Once again, I can’t go into the details of Walton’s careful exegesis, but remember that it’s based strongly on trying to understand the meaning of the words *as the author spoke/wrote and his hearers heard*, i.e. in the cultural context of their time and **not** in the culture of our time.

Walton’s main focus is Genesis 1:1 to 2:3 but he briefly broadens to include the whole of Genesis. His claim is that the book is divided into 12 parts, using the literary feature “This is the account of...”, so I checked against my NIV Study Bible; yes, they confirm it as a literary feature but their “literary outline” is rather different:

- I. Introduction (1:1–2:3)
- II. Body (2:4–50:26)
  - A: “The account of the heavens and the earth” (2:4–4:26)
  - B: “The account of...”
  - ...
  - J: “The account of Jacob” (37:2–50:26)

But an introduction plus ten “accounts of” is **eleven** parts. Whoa! is Walton mistaken? I checked by searching for “The account of”, and those words actually appear **eleven** times, not **ten**. The NIV notes ignore the fact that Esau’s story is divided into two parts, the second being “The account of Esau...in the hill country of Seir”.

Walton doesn’t make a big issue of this, but if we took his analysis of Genesis, the Study Bible’s “literary outline” would become, quite simply, a list of **twelve** “accounts” – and twelve, of course, is much more “Old Testament” than ten or eleven. Like it!

More importantly, turning back to my Study Bible, they explain what scholars have long believed (and Walton agrees): there are the literary parallels between days 1, 2 and 3 and days 4, 5 and 6, and the themes they see as parallel are:

- |                     |                                          |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------|
| (1) “light”         | (4) “lights”                             |
| (2) “water”         | (5) “every living creature in the water” |
| (3) a. “dry ground” | (6) a1. “livestock”                      |
|                     | a2. “man”                                |
| b. “vegetation”     | b. “every green plant”                   |

Not exactly a snappy and easy-to-assimilate overview – if I’d produced that as a way to communicate God’s act of creation, the marketing boys wouldn’t have been very impressed!

Walton’s view? He sees (1) to (3) as establishing the basic **functions** of the cosmos and (4) to (6) as establishing the **‘functionaries’** – maybe we could say the ‘moving bits’ of the cosmos (my words, not Walton’s).

So Walton’s interpretation sees (1) to (3) as establishing the basics of what mankind is going to need in order to function in this human-focused cosmos: (1) **time**, (2) **weather** – *water* systems from below and above the earth (remember, to the ancients there was water *above* the sky, held back by the **firmament**, and water below which bubbled up) and (3) **food production** on the *dry land* (reading verses vv. 3–13, I think makes sense). With those three functions working – time, weather, food – mankind could function and prosper.

(A supplementary point is that while other ANE cosmologies are about how humans have to provide food for, and to serve, the gods, our wonderful Creator is more concerned about how **He** can provide food for **us**. Yes, God is going to inhabit this cosmos-temple <sup>[131]</sup>, but God’s concern is to care for us, his special creation. Having seen God-in-Jesus, do you see how God’s selfless, serving, loving character is displayed in creation? Luvvit!)

So then, Day (4) is the creation of those **elements that mark out time**: sun, moon and stars, (5) is the **creatures** that live and prosper within the cosmos (the water and the sky), and (6) “Let the land produce living creatures” (not good science, but remember it’s not a scientific document), so it’s the **creatures** on the dry land and their reproduction – and humankind is part of that system of creatures that reproduce.

How much clearer and more elegant is this pattern than those in the NIV notes. Why is their view so complicated? They are desperately trying to force Genesis into being a material view of creation, which was never the author’s intention!

Oh, how God must grieve over the generations of people who, as scientific knowledge has mushroomed, have turned their backs on Jesus because we have wrongly tried to insist on Genesis being a **material** description of creation. We have ended up caught in the dilemma of “creation OR evolution” – a total non-issue, as Walton explains in the latter part of his book.

And finally today, what about the issue of the two different versions of creation that Genesis gives us: 1:1 to 2:3 and 2:4ff. Scholars have tied themselves in knots over this – again because they see it materially instead of functionally.

So, Walton’s view is that the former gives us a first way of looking at creation: God took the chaos and darkness and made it all **function** so that it was all **very good** (remember, Walton believes that the Hebrew word, which we translate ‘good’, means something more like ‘functioning well’). That’s all very fine, but it’s not enough; we need

another way of seeing it because the first hearers well knew that, looking around, it's really not 'good' anymore; it's not functioning properly.

So then Genesis 2:4ff explains **why** it's not functioning properly – and it's not God's fault! This second "account of the heavens and the earth, when they were created" sees things from a different angle, to contrast "good functioning" and "sin".

The two accounts are two ways of looking at creation and are provided for different purposes. That is how we need to read them. If we mess around trying to square them as two different *material* accounts, it just ties us in knots and we end up totally missing the point of why they were written! What's more, in doing so we can often alienate the next, more scientific generation from the things of God.

Paul Bev. 4.9.20

## 133 Genesis – Creation and evolution

I have a friend who is worried about the way people like Richard Dawkins seek to undermine the Christian faith, especially in regard to creation and evolution, and I quite understand that. Does John Walton <sup>[130–132]</sup> have anything to help us? He certainly does.

My knowledge of Dawkins' view is mainly second hand, I must admit, but I gather that one of his problems with Christianity is some of the awful things Christians have done, through the centuries, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth – and I have total sympathy with him there.

Secondly, Dawkins' view of the God of the Bible is vitriolic. He's really not a happy bunny about things like God instructing his people to commit genocide – and again I have total sympathy with that view. And we as Christians have made things worse by either (a) burying our heads in the sand, and trying to point away to the thousands of other passages that show God as loving and self-sacrificing or, far worse, (b) trying to justify God's perceived actions by saying that the people they were told to kill deserved it. What?! The men *and* women *and* children *and* livestock?! But I digress; on this topic, please read Boyd's *Cross Vision* <sup>[124–129]</sup>.

The other issue he has, and by which he thinks he's somehow disproved Christianity, is in the area of creation and evolution. And while Walton's book doesn't specifically mention Dawkins, he is extremely helpful on this issue.

To be fair, we make problems for ourselves by seeing Genesis as a description of the material origins. No, says Walton, it's a description of functional origins. God created the universe materially, we believe, yes, but Genesis 1 tells us how God brings the universe to functional completeness as a home for those creatures into whom God breathes the breath of life, and then God comes to dwell in this glorious temple, the cosmos <sup>[132]</sup>.

How can we understand this important distinction between material and functional? Walton tries to explain it:

Thousands of years ago, when Genesis was written, people knew that God (or "the gods", for those who didn't know **the** God) was the creator and sustainer of everything. So for them, any idea of "natural" and "supernatural" would have been meaningless – it was all God's actions.

And once we start to think in terms of natural/supernatural, we began to ask ourselves, when something happens, was it "God wot did it" or did it "just happened"? So the explicable is natural and the inexplicable is God's action. The trouble with that (totally unbiblical) view is that as science develops, much of the inexplicable is then explained; so the bit that "God did" gets less and less. Walton uses the image of dividing up a pie, with God's portion getting smaller.

He encourages us to "change dessert" and use his "layer cake" model. In this, he thinks of the layer of understanding and concern that science addresses as the bottom half of the cake. The upper part is the work of God,

which completely covers the lower level. Ultimately, God is the source and controller of everything; without God, nothing would exist, and if God were to withdraw his support, it would again cease to exist.

Within its layer, science does its job, as the OED says, “The intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment.” But within that job, it says nothing, can say nothing, about the existence or not of the upper layer.

A good, humble, honest scientist will say that such and such is our current best model of how things work, and she will be careful to admit that if more empirical evidence comes along that contradicts that model, she must rethink, reinterpret and come up with a better model; that’s good science, knowing its limits, and knowing that we can only ever *disprove* something, and never *prove* anything.

Bad science, really bad science, says that science can prove that God does or doesn’t exist (a) because, as I have just said, science cannot *prove* anything, and (b) because science deals only with the material, mechanistic aspect of existence; it cannot tell us anything about *purpose*. (Walton mentions teleology, the study of purpose.) So science may tell us *how* things work, but it cannot provide any teleology.

Because Dawkins is so unhappy about Christianity he allows himself – despite being a highly qualified and competent scientist – to become very unscientific. He uses the pie model and tells us that, because we’re so clever, we know how things work, so we no longer need to believe in a God who is responsible for the things we don’t understand.

But to be fair, we play right into Dawkins’ hands when we try to insist that Genesis tells us, materially, *how* the universe was made; it doesn’t, it’s more concerned about *why* it exists. So arguing about timespans is unhelpful.

Dawkins says something like: “Christians say the universe was created in six days; we know it took a lot longer, so Christians are wrong and God doesn’t exist.”

We try to argue back, on his terms, maybe talking about “days” actually meaning “periods of time”, which is not the issue. He is trying to draw teleological conclusions from scientific theories and models – which is what biological evolution is, our current best guess about how things came to be, materially.

Dawkins needs to become a better scientist, and engage in proper theological discussion, where atheism is accepted as a perfectly valid theological position – a position of personal belief.

And we need to relax a little, have faith in the God of the Bible, and allow the Bible to talk to us about purpose and relationships and worship and so on, instead of trying to treat the Bible as if it could tell us about material origins.

I’m not sure if that helps, but I have realised, in rereading Walton, that it is a quite theologically technical book. What it says is important, but hopefully I can make it more digestible.

Paul Bev. 6.9.20

## **134 Reading the Bible backwards**

Have you ever seen, at close quarters, a child growing up, and watched how their language and behaviour develops? I find it fascinating with my grandchildren – especially the language side, of course. And this made me think about Jesus growing up, and how frustrating it is that we know so little about his childhood, apart from that episode where he got left behind, in the temple.

But let’s think about it: as Jesus grew, he would presumably have learned to say ‘Mama’ and ‘Dada’ (well, the Aramaic(?) equivalent), yet this is God-in-human-form we’re talking about here. Jesus knew the Father, intimately, and yet here he was as a baby unable to express himself, other than crying to let his parents know he was hungry or had filled his nappy – how strange!

Anyway, as he grew to adolescence, and went to the synagogue (each week?), learned to read and write, and had annual(?) visits to the temple, I wonder what was going through his mind?

Presumably, the human Jesus would have watched his human parents and learned from them – and from the Scribes and Pharisees – about the religion of the day, and as he learned to read, he would have read the Scriptures. I wonder what he thought?

Of course, Jesus has the massive advantage that, as he's reading those Scriptures, he already knows what the Father is really like. I wonder if he had the same struggle I've had these past few years? I wonder what he thought, for example, when he read that his loving heavenly Father had, in one situation, apparently told the Israelites to slaughter every man, woman and child?

So I think this is my point for today. When Jesus read the Scriptures, did he just take them at face value and say, "Well, if the author says that's what God told them to do, then those were indeed God's actual instructions."?

No, I don't think so. When Jesus read the Scriptures, (a) (as I've said) he knew what God was really like and (b) he knew (as I've begun to realise) that the authors were people of their time and culture. Based on that, he would then be able to interpret the Scriptures.

Jesus knew that his Father was gradually trying to draw people *away* from their ancient Near East (ANE) view that the gods had to be appeased. (At least God managed to convince Abram about child sacrifice!) The Father wanted to show them how much he loved them, but that takes time, so when the OT authors spoke about God as telling them to do this and that, some of what they wrote would have been affected by their partial (distorted) understanding of God.

Don't worry, I'm not chopping out the bits of the Bible I don't like; indeed, I think I've now got a much *higher* view of Scripture than I've ever had. How amazing that God could inspire people who had such a distorted view to write such wonderful and insightful words. Despite the negative impression that some of their words might give us about God, we see within those words flashes of the jewel-like truths that would emerge when Jesus came to earth. Think about all those wonderful predictions that came true in Jesus – just brilliant!

So yes we *can* trust the Bible 100% – as Jesus did – even though it says things about God which, I'm sorry, simply aren't true. God was willing to be misunderstood by his people (and here I'm back to Greg Boyd's excellent book that I looked at in <sup>[124–129]</sup>), for the greater good of communicating the truth to us, a truth that we can still learn from thousands of years later.

I now feel that I understand, better than ever, what Jesus meant when he said "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them." (Mt 5:17) Jesus wasn't chucking any of the (OT) Bible out; rather he was showing us what God was *really* trying to communicate through it. Presumably that's why he got so cross with the Pharisees, when they saw the OT as a book about "what you ought and ought not to do", and not about showing us the incredible self-sacrificing love that God has for us.

So this is what I mean by reading the Bible backwards: not until Jesus showed us what God was really like could we understand and appreciate what God was trying to communicate when he inspired the OT writers.

And the process doesn't stop there. The authors of the *New Testament* didn't have an infallible view of what God was really like, either; they too were creatures of their own time and culture.

Once again, we have to look at what the NT authors wrote (inspired by God, yes) and ask, what principles were they giving us that we can apply today? The New Testament, like the Old Testament, is *not* a guide to "what's right and wrong" (and how much terrible damage we have done by making that mistake over the centuries!); it tells us, gloriously, what God is really like, so then we have to apply *that* knowledge to help us see how to relate to God and to one another.

So when someone (Christian or not) says, "The Bible says we should [or, more likely, we *shouldn't*] do such and such", you have my full permission to tell them that they are reading their Bible the wrong way round: "Please find



out *first* what God is really like (i.e. what Jesus was like), and *then* you can start to interpret the Scriptures and maybe think about ethics/morals.”

Bless you all!

Paul Bev. 11.10.20

## 135 Purpose, problem and a 2000-year plan

My journey these past months – well, years now – can be summed up as seeing what God has been doing over the *huge span of time* that the Bible represents, and the *huge span and movement of human understanding and behaviour*. (Bit vague, sorry, but read on...)

The important principle I’ve picked up is that to understand and interpret the Old Testament, we have to start from an understanding of what God is **really** like, i.e. he’s like Jesus: ‘If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father’ – a God of unconditional love and inclusivity, but a God of holiness. I expressed this idea last time<sup>[134]</sup> as ‘Reading the Bible backwards’, i.e. understanding the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament.

Secondly, we also need to understand that what the writers of the Old Testament **thought** God was like is sometimes very different from what God is **actually** like – Jesus demonstrates this in his references to the Old Testament.

John Walton’s book, ‘Genesis One’<sup>[130–133]</sup> has been really helpful to me in seeing what creation is really all about (Gen 1–3), and another of his (much earlier) books<sup>13</sup> has recently helped me with the story of redemption – i.e. the remaining 1186 chapters of the Bible!

Given the kind of God we see in Jesus, I have some questions for you (+ some possible answers):

### **Purpose**

- What does God want most of all? (To be in a loving relationship with the people of earth)
- Which people? (**All** people **throughout** the world)
- How can God achieve that? (Difficult!)

### **Problem**

- What kind of people did God have to work with, around 2000 BC, when he started his plan? (Warring tribes, who thought that God was [the gods were] capricious and needed to be appeased.)

As Walton says, ‘Israel in particular came from a milieu [ancient Near East] in which the gods were objects of **mistrust**.’ (my bold)

Revision questions:

- Whom does God want to bless? (The whole world)
- So how is God going to bless these warring tribes? (Difficult!)
- To enter a relationship, what do you need most? (**Trust** – the opposite of the then current view)
- How does God build trust? (**Makes promises and keeps them!**)

### **Plan**

So here’s God’s plan (in Walton’s view, which I find compelling): Make promises (covenants) and keep them, regardless of how the other party (humans) treat you. God has kept the Noahic covenant, and not brought a universal flood, but the main part of the plan comes in four stages.

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Covenant – God’s Purpose, God’s Plan’ (1994) – but I don’t actually recommend you read it, as it’s **very** heavy; I really struggled to understand it!

**Stage 1:** God looks for someone willing to **trust** him, and he finds Abraham and makes a covenant with him: *I'll make you the father of a great nation, and **through your offspring** I will bless the **whole of humankind**.*

2000 BC: **Abraham** sometimes trusted God but sometimes didn't keep his side of the covenant; nevertheless God kept his promises. (Indeed, the Abrahamic blessing is still available, in Jesus!)

**Stage 2:** God's people are in bondage, as slaves in Egypt, so God looks for someone to **trust** him and makes a covenant with him: *I will lead you and your people back to the promised land.*

1500 BC: **Moses** sometimes trusted God but sometimes didn't keep his side of the covenant; nevertheless God kept his promises and delivered Israel. (That deliverance is now the archetype of deliverance in Jesus.)

**Stage 3:** God's people are no longer trusting God to lead them. 'We want a king, like all the other nations!' So God says, 'It'll end in tears!' but acquiesces. They choose Saul, who turns out to be a 'bad king'<sup>TM</sup>. So God looks for someone who will **trust** him, and makes a covenant with him: *For all time, there will be a king from your house and line.*

1000 BC: **David** sometimes trusted God but sometimes didn't keep his side of the covenant; nevertheless God kept his promises and there is indeed a King for ever, from the house and line of David: Jesus.

**Stage 4:** God's people are in bondage – under Rome's iron hand – and looking for the promised Messiah. God **entrusts** Jesus to Mary's care, then Jesus lives a life of **trust** in his heavenly Father, and God makes a new covenant with his people: *through the death of Jesus, God himself will come to live in his people (extended to include Gentiles) by God's Holy Spirit of truth.*

2000+ AD: We sometimes trust God and sometimes don't keep our side of the covenant; nevertheless God keeps his promise and the Holy Spirit is with us for ever.

So, how do I (after Walton) now view the purpose and plan of God? Each covenant, in turn, has led the people of God further forwards, by revealing more of what God is **really** like, rather than what people at the time **thought** God was like.

No covenant was ever revoked; each built on the previous one; each showed us more of God; and then we get the final, full, new covenant where we see exactly what God is like – Jesus! Awesome!

So while the covenants ultimately lead to the means of salvation that is found only in Jesus, the **prime aim** of the covenants (according to Walton, anyway) is to reveal more about God, to give us a truer and truer picture, culminating in Jesus.

I hope you find this encouraging.

Paul Bev. 15.11.20

## 136 Emmanuel, God's presence is with us

This past 2½ years, I've had a growing sense of excitement as I've stopped seeing the Old Testament as a problem. As God has turned that negative into a massive positive – it's been (and still is) a thrilling and faith-building journey.

The most recent helps that God has used in my life (but I realise that God might use others in your life) have been Boyd's *Cross Vision*<sup>[124–129]</sup> and Walton's *Lost World of Genesis One*.<sup>[130–133]</sup> Today's insight came courtesy of a [sermon](#) by John Walton that I found on YouTube.

Walton says that Genesis 1 pictures how God prepared the universe as a sort of temple in which his presence came to dwell, and so it became a place where God lived in close communion with humans. Heaven!

But, tempted by the evil powers, we made the mistake of wanting to 'be like God'<sup>Gen 3</sup> and thus to order our lives around ourselves. God therefore gave us what we said we wanted – to control our own lives – and he withdrew his presence. And what happens when God withdraws his presence? Death happens. Hell happens.

Walton then opened up the story of Babel. From his knowledge of the religions of the ancient Near East (ANE), he sees them as building the tower to reach up to God and bring God down, for his presence to dwell with them. Why? So that they could 'make a name for ourselves',<sup>Gen 11:4</sup> *not* to exalt God's name. God knew it would end in tears, so he confused their languages.

But God *does* want – above all else – to establish his **presence** among the people of the whole earth. And Walton claims (and this is his other specialist subject) that **covenant**, in its various stages through history, is the long-term mechanism that God uses for setting up that relationship; it's the mechanism by which God reveals himself to humans.

So God says to Abraham, 'Let's have a relationship' (note, there's no mention of needing laws or rituals – that comes 500 years later!). Through Abraham, God wanted to bless and to have a relationship with **all the people of the earth**. So God had to start by wooing Abraham away from his pagan, sacrifice-based ANE religion – a mammoth task!

Probably one of the best ways to give people a chance to change is to take them on a journey, so when Abraham was 75 (slightly older than me!), God asked him to leave Ur and travel to an unspecified 'promised land'.

But that 'journey', in a sense, continued after Abraham's death. God still had a lot of teaching to do, and so God allowed circumstances to take Abraham's descendants into Egypt, into slavery. God then used those circumstances to teach his people to trust him – well, he tried, anyway!

Next, God helped his people to escape from Egypt – a massive learning experience for them! As if that wasn't enough, God then led them through the wilderness and established a covenant with them at Sinai. (Aside: Gosh, mustn't Moses have been incandescent when he came down with the tablets and found that the people had gone back to the old ANE worship ways!)

In Exodus 40, Moses is about to dedicate the tabernacle (not a temple yet). Moses tells the people just how **incredibly** significant this is: finally, God is going to come and bring his **presence** into the midst of his people, which was *God's plan all along*.

Then throughout the subsequent history of the Jews, time and again they try to live by the ANE way, not God's way. So, to bring them to their senses, God withdraws his presence and protection, and disaster befalls them; then they turn back to God, and God's presence returns and they are rescued – but it was a constantly repeating cycle.

Aside: It's true that the Old Testament writers talked about this as God 'punishing' his people, but if you look carefully at those texts, you will see how God inspired the writers to drop hints that the 'punishment' took the form of God simply withdrawing his presence and allowing sin to take its natural course (as Boyd points out).

Within that long dark story, we see shafts of sunlight, where God reveals something of his long-term plan. As it's Advent, we can think of Isaiah's prediction of the coming of Emmanuel – **God with us**. God's **presence** was coming to dwell with us! And that was *God's plan all along*.

All through this journey, the powers of evil were trying to encourage us in the direction of sin, in the direction of orienting our lives around ourselves. But God had a plan, an ultimate plan, a daring once-for-all plan – the **incarnation**.

When Jesus was a baby, the powers of hell sought to kill him, through Herod. But God's time was not right, so God protected Jesus through Joseph's responding to a dream, and taking Jesus – ironically – to Egypt!

Then when God's time was right, the sin of the whole world was substituted onto the sinless Jesus, and the Father withdrew his protective presence, so Herod + Pilate + the chief priests (egged on by the powers of darkness) were finally able to kill Jesus.

In other words, the 'wrath of God fell on Jesus', where 'wrath' means the reluctant withdrawing of God's protecting presence – hence Jesus' cry of 'Why have you forsaken me?!'

Walton's sermon then takes us to Pentecost and here again we have God's presence, this time dwelling **IN** his people! Note how Pentecost is the reverse of Babel, because people can all hear the declaration of God's praises in many different languages at the same time. This was *God's plan all along*.

Finally, Walton moves right to the very end of the Bible. In Revelation 21 and 22, there is **no temple**! It's not needed – it's all 100% God's presence. And that was *God's plan all along*!

As Walton jokes, when you get a sermon about the Old Testament, you have to go right through the whole Bible to see the full picture – it's all of a piece!

Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!

Paul Bev. 14.12.20

## ***137 Do you possess eternal life?***

A new curate or assistant minister comes to your church. His name is Joshua<sup>14</sup> Davidson, and you're looking forward to hearing his first sermon.

He talks about heaven and hell and how we can gain the former and avoid the latter – we need to believe in Jesus. His text is John 3:36: *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him*. A great start!

His second sermon is also about heaven and hell, about the sheep and the goats, but this time he says that people will go to heaven if they *do good*: those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit people in prison. His text is Jesus' sermon on the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46. Worse still, he says that people will go to hell if they *don't do good*! <sup>[60]</sup>

What kind of theological college did this chap go to?! A very unsound one, obviously.

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<sup>14</sup> "Joshua shares origins with the name Jesus, which comes from the Aramaic variation Yeshu'a."

OK, I'm messing about here, but I do wonder what kind of reception Jesus, son of David, would get if he started preaching in our church, your church. Why does he insist on saying things he's not supposed to say, things that don't fit in with our systematic theology?!

Yes, I know that we need to read Scripture in context, but let's be honest, some of the things Jesus says are, frankly, contradictory. Why does he do that?! It's so unhelpful to those of us who are trying to understand Jesus and what his message is to us, so that we can get it across to others!

And as I've suggested, maybe we have ended up selecting only those Scriptures that we feel communicate Jesus' basic message, and ignoring those that don't!

So why does Jesus say different, sometimes contradictory, things at different times? Maybe it's because being a believer is about knowing a person and not about knowing the theology? Maybe we each need to hear different things at different times in our lives, at different stages in our relationship with the Father?

So as churches, how do we try to get people to come into that relationship, especially when people are at different places on their journey towards the Father?

Well, I'll tell you how *not* to do it. [Watch out, there's a hobbyhorse about to come riding by...]

Clearly, people can't come into a relationship with Jesus unless and until they understand the good news that Jesus died on the cross to take away our sins, right? And they can't appreciate how much that is **good** news unless and until they understand that they are **sinner**s. So we have to preach that: "You're a sinner and you need to be saved!"

If that's the insistent message that our churches put across, is it any wonder that people don't seem to want to come into a relationship with Jesus!

Mine isn't to judge any church, but if you're a committed member of a church, what's wrong with challenging yourself about your own church? How does **your** church come across? What do **your** preachers bang on about all the time? (How do **you** come across to your friends and family?)

As I was writing this article, a few days ago, that's as far as I could get.

Then today I read Jesus' words to the Pharisees: *You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.* (John 5:39,40)

That is, I feel, what God has been showing me: I have spent years of my life, searching the Scriptures to know whether or not I 'possess' eternal life; am I going to be saved or not? When I was off in that cult, this was highly exaggerated, and I was driven by real fear, fear that I wouldn't be one of the chosen ones – it sounds stupid, but that's what happened to me [article 0].

In these past few exciting years, I've realised more and more how much I had become a Pharisee, and how destructive that has been for my life, and how destructive it has been for the lives of the people I have tried to influence, people I love.

Having discovered anew the amazing love of the Trinity, I now just want to demonstrate that love to people around me – anyone around me. If people show an interest in my faith, I will talk about the person of Jesus, whom I love with all my heart.

God is perfectly capable of bringing people into a conviction of sin, as and when they need to; mine is to concentrate on God's love for them – as the Scriptures do, from beginning to end.

## 138 Do you have faith?

Check me out on this. Abraham was a child of his time. He was born into a pagan society, but God saw potential in him. What was God's plan? As I think I might have mentioned once or twice(!), God's plan was to bless the whole earth through Abraham's descendants.

Talk about a long-term project!

But what was Abraham's view of God? Presumably it was more or less the same view as his contemporaries – of a warring deity who had to be placated in some way lest he destroy you, but if you treat God right, he'll bless you and help you flourish.

Or have I got my understanding wrong? Please correct me if I'm wrong in my thinking there.

I'm putting it that starkly because we can all too easily view Abraham – and all the rest of the OT characters – as people who “knew God”.

Well, yes, that's true to an extent. They did know God in the sense that God was gradually revealing himself to them, but that didn't happen overnight, and it didn't happen completely over the lifetime of Abraham, and it didn't happen within a century of Abe's death, and it didn't happen in a millennium, or even two millennia – Abraham lived ~2000 BC, remember.

So, within those 2000 years, people were learning about and, at the same time, they were writing about Yahweh. They told us what God was like, they wrote that “God said this” and “God did that”.

Were they inspired by God in their writing? Yes, I very much believe they were.

Do they tell us exactly what God is like? Now that's a very good question.

Before Jesus came to show us what God is like, could *anyone* know what God is really like?

And do we *now* know exactly what God is like, now that we've seen Jesus? No! We're human, so we still have a distorted view of God.

Did the New Testament writers know exactly what God is like?! After all, they physically *met* Jesus, talked to him, learned one-to-one with him (well, Paul didn't, and he wrote a goodly chunk of the New Testament).

What am I doing here? Am I trying to destroy your Bible-based faith?!

No, I'm saying that our faith is in the Person who caused Holy Scripture to be written, and we can trust that Person to inspire us as we read those Scriptures to get to know that Person as a result of our studies.

What is absolutely remarkable is that although those Scriptures were written by people with a less than perfect understanding of that Person, nevertheless God can and does use those Scriptures – if we trust that Person, if we have faith in that Person – to bring us personally closer and closer to that Person.

Isn't that remarkable?! What an amazing God we worship! Thank you, Father, for the Holy Scriptures. Thank you, Father, for that Living Scripture, that Living Word who lives with us and dwells within us and who brings those Scriptures alive.

“Yes, but *how* do we read the Scriptures if they give us a distorted view of what God is like?”

Good question. And that's the difficult bit; it requires faith. We need to trust God to guide us, and step out in faith, read the Scriptures and try to ask ourselves, “Why did God inspire someone to write this?” and “What was God trying to tell us, through this fallible person?”

In my view, it doesn't require any faith at all to take the line that "What the Bible says is true, right, correct. What it says it means. Live with it!" (That attitude has, in my view, caused the wreck of countless people's journeys of faith.)

It's much harder to read the Bible faith-fully, trusting God to show us which bits are culturally affected by the writer's worldview.

The latter is how I think Jesus viewed the Old Testament Scriptures when he said he didn't come to do away with them but to fulfil (or full-fill) them.

What an amazing God we serve, who is determined to use whatever means possible to get us to know the wonderful love we see in Jesus, our Lord!

Paul Bev. 9.2.21

## 139 God's Trojan horse ploy

Three ladies are all interested in analysing human behaviour, one in America, one in Bolivia and one in China. Each has heard that the others are experts in the field and want to compare ideas, but the American only speaks English, the Bolivian Spanish and the Chinese lady Chinese.

To make matters worse, they can only communicate (let's suppose) by sending emails, i.e. only written messages – plus of course they each have to use translators.

So that's three different people from entirely different cultures, A, B and C, using three different languages, through translators, and they are trying to communicate about life-important matters involving thoughts, feelings and ways of expressing oneself, using only written words.

Yeh, right! Like that's going to work?!

Compare that with how God is going to communicate life-important matters to people of different cultures, different languages and in different times in history (over four thousand years+), also given the vast increase in the span of human knowledge.

As I've rehearsed in my thoughts here before, God spoke to one bloke, Abram, in his time and culture, and said (to the effect that), "I want you to know what I'm *really* like – not at all what you think I'm like! And through you I want you to spread the message of love around the globe."

Over the next 1600 years, God talked to different people, and got them to write down words that would help people know what God is *really* like (the Old Testament).

Then, after another 400 years came God's masterstroke. You can find out what God is *really* like by meeting the actual person – God, standing right there in front of you, doing things, saying things and showing you what God is *really* like.

Great! Problem solved ... well, sort of.

Only a relatively small number of people were able to meet God (Jesus) face to face, so God got a few people to write down (yet more) words to tell us what Jesus (God) was like, what he said, what he did and how he related to people.

Great! Problem solved ... well, sort of.

Those words (to add to those in the OT) were written down, but in languages that we don't speak, in a culture that we don't understand. Yes, the Bible is helpful, very helpful – indeed, we'd be lost without it – but it has to be (interpreted and then) translated and interpreted.

But try putting four Bible translations side by side from Unitarians, Jehovah's Witnesses and two very different mainstream Christian traditions and see how they compare! (“Ah yes, but ‘they’ translated the Bible on the basis of wrong theology!”, whoever ‘they’ happens to be.)

One surprising thought: Even before the New Testament was written down, the knowledge of what God is *really* like spread rapidly and effectively? How could it?! Does 2 Cor 3:2,3 help?

You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

So God's plan for communicating this vital message of what God is *really* like is to use people like you and me – as a sort of Trojan horse. God wants to dwell inside us, and we then go out amongst people and, by the way we live and the kind of love-filled people we are, we will be communicating what God is *really* like. Really?! Help!

So we desperately need to build up our relationship with the Father, so that the image we bear is at least a *little bit* like what God is really like!

But we still need know what God is trying to say through the Bible, but maybe asking “How did **Jesus** know what God was trying to say through the **Old Testament?**” will help.

We study it, of course, and we ask other people (using commentaries, maybe) what they think God was trying to say. But my thinking (and is this what Jesus thought?) is that we must get to know the *person* behind the Bible. Jesus knew that Person – his heavenly Father – so when he read the Old Testament, he was able to discern which bits showed the true nature of the Father, and which bits were either cultural distortions or misunderstandings of the authors.

So to check out *the word of God* (the Bible) we need to set it alongside what we know of *the Word of God (Jesus)*. So we need to get to know the Person, better and better and better.

Finally, here's an illustration of checking our Scripture interpretation against the Person we know, and this is actually what triggered today's outpouring. I was reading Col. 3:6 about the wrath of God (a topic I find difficult), so I looked at the commentary notes in my NIV Study Bible and it hit me like a sledgehammer (negatively, I mean). Here are the commentator's words put into the mouth of Jesus. See if you think it sound like the Jesus you know...

*And Jesus said to them, “My loving heavenly Father is **unalterably opposed to sin and will invariably make sure that it is justly punished.**”*

OK, I have more questions than answers, but if we (a) study our Bible for all it's worth and (b) work towards knowing God better, then (c) by being who we truly are (a sinner loved desperately by God), we will communicate to those around us that God loves them desperately; God doesn't want to punish them but to steer them away from self-centred lives (a.k.a. sin) into Jesus-centred lives (joy and peace and love and justice and compassion and...)

May God grant you real joy in your relationships, both with God and with others, and may we, together, shine like stars in the universe!

Paul Bev. 18.5.21



## 140 Penal substitution: true or false?

“So, Paul, in your fourth year of giving us the benefit of your theological thinking, please tell us: Is the idea of penal substitution true or false?”

OK, I admit it: in earlier articles, I said that penal substitution (PS) was false – a heresy that grew to prominence in the mid second millennium. However, having wrestled with PS and with the Scriptures related to it and with theologically trained folk, I no longer say that it’s false.

But I was asking the wrong question. PS is not a concept that can be “right” or “wrong”. It’s a metaphor, a picture, an image to help us understand and to appreciate, in some small way, the enormity of what Jesus did for us on the cross.

Pictures, illustrations, images, metaphors, parables are all given to us by God to help us grasp the ungraspable. And we have good precedent: Jesus and Paul, to name but two.

But one person will find one illustration helpful and another not so helpful – that’s fine, we’re all different. What’s more, if you put some of the biblical metaphors/images side by side – indeed, some of Jesus’ own words – they do appear to be contradictory. No analogy is perfect, and we certainly shouldn’t stretch them too far – or they can snap and flick us in the eye!

So I accept that PS is indeed based on the teachings of the New Testament but, to be clear, it was only first articulated around the time of the Reformation, in the 16th century, although it had its origins in Anselm’s 11th century ideas of “substitution” in a more general sense.

Despite the fact that the gospel spread around the world for over 1500 years without it, PS has become the most-used illustration of the gospel: find me one gospel tract that does **not** use PS!

So one single image of God’s love in Jesus has become the be-all and end-all, and anyone who, like me, says that it’s often not a very helpful illustration is considered unsound.

And the effect of putting PS centre stage? How long have you got?! I believe that it warps our view of God and it warps our view of ourselves, and this has a huge effect on... well, on everything: how we view ourselves, how we come across to other people, the focus of our thinking, feeling, being, witnessing, serving. Let me illustrate.

Even a theologically trained friend admits that, for some people, PS is “pastorally inappropriate, to say the least”. This comment came as we thought about a person, say, who had been abused over the years and thus had a very low self image. As “the gospel” is preached, they hear “You are a terrible sinner and deserve to be judged by God and to die; but don’t despair because God loves you and has allowed Jesus to be crucified instead of you; he suffered the punishment that **you** deserve for all the evil things **you** have done. Hallelujah! What good news!”

An exaggeration? OK, well how would **you** “explain the gospel” to them?

I’ve found help from “Healing the Gospel” by Derek Flood: the fundamental distinction he draws, as I’ve tried to explain in my articles,<sup>15</sup> is between **retributive justice**, which is the core of “the (PS) gospel”, and **restorative justice**, which I now believe is the beating heart of the early church’s “good news”. (It was the Pharisees who were into retributive justice!)

I gave an illustration last time <sup>[139]</sup> of the influence of retributive justice when I mentioned Col 3:6 and quoted a note from my NIV Study Bible: “*God is unalterably opposed to sin and will invariably make sure that it is justly punished.*” Whose mouth would you expect to hear that from? Jesus or the Pharisees?!

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<sup>15</sup> I hadn’t realised Flood’s influence on me until I checked the P000 file (the text of all my articles). I reference Flood’s ideas in articles 51–54, 57, 61, 65, 76 and 110–112! He has certainly “healed the gospel” for me. Thanks, Derek!

This article started as a response to a discussion of PS's complementary concept, "original sin". Are we by nature evil? How we view ourselves is fundamental to how we relate – or not! – to God and to other people. One person felt that "[because] we continually ask for forgiveness, especially together in church services, I feel it must be in our nature to sin." So, PS has pushed us into seeing ourselves as fundamentally evil – saved by grace, yes, but evil through and through!

We need to be realistic about ourselves, yes, but it's so destructive if we are constantly concentrating on "the evil that lies within". We were created in the image of God, we were created good and beautiful and wonderful – mixed up and messed up, true, but fundamentally good. Without that optimism, developing good relationships is going to be very difficult.

One final, sad reason that PS has appealed to us: since the Enlightenment (16/17th centuries), we've been trained to look at everything and ask if it's "true" or not, and the modern mind is strongly trained to analyse things and work out the "mechanism", and for salvation, that's PS.

This simple mechanism also appeals because we like (another of our many sins?!) to categorise people: "Has she prayed the sinner's prayer? OK, good, so she's a Christian." Sorry, but life and people are more complex; we're not fundamentally mechanisms, we're people who relate (or don't relate) to other people and to God.

We **say** that knowing God is a relationship, so let's stop offering everyone with the same one-size-fits-all mechanism of PS and concentrate on drawing everyone (whether an acknowledged believer or not) closer and closer to Jesus (modelling and) understanding more about loving relationships (vertical and horizontal) – that's what set the world alight in the first century!

Paul Bev. 9.6.21

## **141 Full circle**

Sorry, but this article doesn't offer a single helpful thought about your/my/our relationship with God, but it kind of feels like the most significant article I've ever written.

I'm in the middle of a situation where I'm seeking to help someone (Clara, let's call her) with a very serious relationship crisis. In her late 70s, she's had several relationships, which have all ended badly, and she has five children she doesn't relate to well, certainly not at present.

A few years ago she finally found someone who really loved her, but Covid kept them apart from July. Two weeks ago, he died, and for various reasons she couldn't go to the funeral. His family have been seriously unhelpful, to put it very mildly. And she doesn't know that God loves her.

This past week, after yet another theological discussion with friends about penal substitution(!) I wrote <sup>[140]</sup>, saying that, while I no longer think it's theologically mistaken, I do think that it can be "pastorally inappropriate, to say the least", as a theological friend put it.

On Friday I felt that God wanted me see that in three difficult situations I face, the answer is to combat **negativity** with the **positive values of God's kingdom**.

And especially for Clara.

Now the gospel (a.k.a. "good news") is exactly what Clara needs, right? But the (only?) way of presenting it starts with "You're a sinner condemned by a righteous God".

So I have to think and pray towards a **positive kingdom way** to replace this **negative** approach. But I have no answers. None!

Please will you help me? This is no theoretical, theological discussion; it's a cry from the depths of my heart of love for Clara! Please get on to your vicars, ministers, priests, theological friends, evangelists and get them to tell me how I can communicate the good news to Clara!

*Deja vu time:* I realised that I had already asked this exact question before. So to look it up, I searched the text of the <sup>[000]</sup> file – the text of all 140 articles. It was in article <sup>[1]</sup>! That was the **start** of this journey; it has come **full circle**, and I'm asking it again.

We're all different, all on a journey of faith, so where are you in your relationship with God? What is God saying to you at the moment? Has God said anything to you that might help me?

Finally, to encourage you that I'm not throwing the (penal substitutionary) baby out with the bathwater, in <sup>[1]</sup> I said (and I now reaffirm):

*I ... hope that we can share our thoughts together, and maybe make some progress in making the gospel accessible to our friends and families.*

***First, what's non-negotiable for me?***

- 1. The central problem is human sin – broken relationships [with God and one another].*
- 2. Our loving God has a plan to sort that problem.*
- 3. The solution (salvation) centres on the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.*
- 4. We need to respond in order to appropriate that salvation.*

Thank you in anticipation for your input on this.

Paul Bev. 13.6.21

[Later...] Thanks for your encouraging responses. Yes, indeed, Clara needs lots of listening, lots of empathy, and lots of unconditional love, but at some stage, she will also need some way of appreciating Jesus' work for her on the cross. If you have a more helpful way of describing atonement than penal substitution, please let me know. Thank you.

## ***142 “Are we nearly there yet?”***

Do you recognise that plea, coming from the back of the car? It's been a long journey since I pleaded for a gospel that was attractive to friends and family <sup>[1]</sup>, something that sounded like actual **good** news. So, am I nearly there yet? Can I help Clara, for example <sup>[140,141]</sup>?

As I asked last time, can I – can we – help to make God's positive kingdom a reality?

Do you remember the start of your own faith journey? Did you have that experience of coming to faith, and it all feeling so exciting and so wonderful? You just couldn't stop talking about it!

I've had that twice now – 1967 and 2017 – the latter when I rediscovered my faith: I came back to that excitement, I regained my first love, and it hasn't gone away – it's been thrilling!

What have I learnt? Why am I still so excited? What discoveries have kept that love alive?

Some stages I can give dates to:

2011 – total faith loss: “Does God even exist? Maybe it's all made up.”

2012 – broke down and wept at a service for our 40 year Pembroke College CU reunion

... for five years trying to rebuild my faith (moved house in 2015)

2017 – ‘discovered’ the Trinity – God actually loves me! – God **IS** relationship.

2017 – ‘discovered’ the welcome of a local Anglican church (= total love and acceptance)

That’s when the writing started. God’s love was really real, but I’ve had to wrestle with the Scriptures. Some bits, if I faced them honestly, didn’t seem quite so loving.

It’s taken me over 140,000 words to process it, but God now looks very different to me – God looks like Jesus, and I think that even unbelievers are capable of seeing how amazing Jesus is.

### **What are my discoveries about Jesus/God?**

Jesus/God’s primary aim is to bring restoration to broken people (because evil destroys people).

Jesus/God’s other crucial aim is to bring restoration to broken systems in the world (because evil systems destroy people and destroy the world).

Together, to me, those add up to “the kingdom”.

### **How does Jesus/God bring this restoration?**

It’s a long-term project, and we need the **whole Bible** to show us the full panorama.

Jesus/God starts it all, and it is good – really, really good: walking with God.

Our wrong choices allow the forces of evil to pervert the good and destroy relationships.

Starting with Abraham, Jesus/God gradually tries to show us what God is like (not a fickle deity to be propitiated, as everyone thought at the time).

Jesus/God drops clever hints into the whole of the Old Testament, pointing to the culmination of the master plan:

“At just the right time...” Jesus/God comes (incarnation) into the evil mess; shows us what Jesus/God really looks like (life exemplar); dies to defeat evil, once and for all, by non-violence (Christus victor); dies to wipe away sin (expiation); dies in our place (substitution); rises to life (death is dead!); steps aside to non-visibility (ascension); sends the Holy Spirit to fill and empower us to work together to continue Jesus/God’s non-violent struggle against evil.

Evil is still very real, but evil is defeated through the cross, and ours is to continue that fight together.

Does that sound like **good news**? It does to me.

I can’t stop talking about it (as you might have noticed).

So, “Are we nearly there yet?”

Nearly, but article 143 is already in draft.

I pray that your journey will continue to draw you closer to our glorious God, so that together we can help Jesus/God’s kingdom to come on earth, as it is in heaven.

## 143 The death of a salesman

(This isn't the article <sup>[143]</sup> that I said yesterday was in draft – this one just snuck up on me!)

I've always been a salesman, starting from when I was a kid, (and I'm not proud of it) nicking stuff from shops and selling it to my mates. I came from a dysfunctional family, so when, as an 18-year-old, I spent a holiday week at a Christian community in Yorkshire, I fell in love, and couldn't stop talking about God: my first experience of a real relationship with God.

But I'm the kind of guy who wants to know, from first principles, how things work, so when I went to college a year later and the CU "explained the gospel", that was it!

So I had the feeling and I also knew "how it worked".

My Christian life since then has gone roughly like this (more detail in article <sup>[0]</sup>):

- *Ten years* as a conservative evangelical trying to persuade charismatics they were wrong.
- *Ten years* as a charismatic trying to persuade conservatives they were wrong.
- *Five years* (after a second experience of finding a relationship with God) persuading others to follow a course: "How to love and be loved".
- *Ten years* as an internet evangelist (motivated by love, I think) trying to persuade unbelievers.
- *Ten years* with a growing feeling that miracles would really help my sales pitch, which led me into a miracle-based cult – we were "right", but didn't waste time trying to persuade others.

Thankfully, one day God woke me up and I escaped, but I had totally lost my faith.

- *Five years* rebuilding my faith along traditional evangelical lines but still with an aching void.
- *Four glorious years ago*, we moved to the local church where we now live, and I discovered that I had been right all along: *Being a Christian really is about living in a relationship with God.*

But being a "working things out from first principles" sort of chap, I have been (and still am) trying to work out how I could have spent fifty years as a Bible-believing Christian and yet not discovered that love. I know that Love has stalked me all these years, and I've seen glimpses, but why, why, why doesn't the Bible make it clearer?!

Thank you God for your truly amazing love!

Paul Bev. 27.6.21

## 144 People's biggest problem is God

In a different context – my struggle, of late, to "understand" (ha!) prayer – I found this quote that hit me between the eyes:

"After more than 25 years in pastoral ministry, 20 of them teaching on prayer, I have come to the conclusion that most people's biggest problem with prayer is God. They envisage him scowling, perpetually disapproving, invariably disappointed and needing to be placated or persuaded in prayer." (Pete Grieg, *How to Pray*, p53)

OK, that's overstated (and I thought I was the master of overstatement!), but maybe this is a bit of what's behind what I said last time, how I fell in love with God as a student at 18 but then the love ebbed away; then I refound that love at age 35...

I remember going into the bank on Unthank Road in Norwich, and the lady behind the counter saying, "You're looking happy today!" and I spontaneously replied, "Yes, I've just realised that God really loves me!" But then I realised what I was saying and added, "Oh, oh, ... and he loves you too!"

... and then I refound that love again at age 68. And this time, I ain't gonna lose it!

Tell me, how many sermons do you remember? Early days at my new church (which follows the church's lectionary, so the passages for each week are set), the preacher said, "We've got the parable of the sower **again!** Look, are you willing to pray with me that God will teach us something new today?" And we prayed... I prayed.

What a rubbish farmer, she admitted. He just chucked the seed willy-nilly all over the place. What a waste of seed! What's the point of slinging seed on the path or among the weeds? But that's what God is like. If there is **any** chance of that seed germinating... God is just desperate for us to receive the seed of his love.

And the other image of God that I have kept returning to me these past four years is the prodigal father. No, that's not a typo. To me that parable is about the prodigal (totally unreasonable, wasteful) nature of God's love – way over the top!

I admit that the elder brother was a bit moody, and not very forgiving, but let's face it, he had a very good point. How totally unfair! This total waste of space had taken half the estate, spent it **all**, come back, just said, "Oops, sorry!" and his father had given him the robe and the ring – which were his by right – and to top it all, he threw a party! That's really, really unfair!

Sorry, no! **That's what God's love is like** – totally unreasonable! Don't expect to understand it (well, do have a go – it's worth the effort, and I have tried these past four years) but just accept that God is totally and utterly besotted with you, and will do whatever it takes to restore you. You'll get the cloak and the ring and the party. That's what God is like! And don't let anyone tell you otherwise because we have Jesus' word for it!

Ha! Maybe I was wrong, maybe Jesus is the master of overstatement...

Paul Bev. 28.6.21

## ***145 History of the world***

As the proud owner of an O level grade 9 in history,<sup>16</sup> I will now give you a history of the world: 4000 years in under 500 words. (Please let me know if any of the dates are wrong.)

~2000 BC – Everybody thought that the gods were generally angry, needing to be propitiated by sacrifices. God knew different; but changing a worldful of minds takes time – thousands of years, in fact. "I'll start small", thought God, but he had big ambitions. He promised Abraham: Through you, I'll bless the whole world... Abraham trusted God, so he was sent on a journey.

God tried to get this one small tribe to trust in his love for them. During a famine, God provided food for them in Egypt, but they didn't trust him and so God allowed them to fall into slavery.

~1500 BC – Moses got them to trust God, and so he was able to rescue them from captivity. But people reverted to thinking that God was more of a smiter than a rescuer. They wanted God to smite their enemies (but they also feared that God would smite them if they didn't do right). So God sent them on a journey, round and round the desert, to teach them to trust him.

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<sup>16</sup> For those not old enough to know, grade 1–6 were passes, 7 was a fail, 8 was "You really failed!" and 9... you get the idea!

~1500 BC – They entered the promised land, which God wanted them to take over by trusting him to drive the people out, but they did it by smiting the inhabitants.<sup>17</sup>

~1000 BC – The people couldn't trust God to lead them – they wanted a king, like everyone else. So God provided King David – flawed, but at least he trusted God.

~600 BC – The people didn't trust God, so he allowed them to be taken into captivity again; when they started to trust God, he rescued them from exile. But people still thought God was a smiter, not a rescuer, and this is reflected in all their (OT) writings. So God kept dropping hints about his loving rescue; his Spirit inspired the OT writers.

To 0 BC – God had again allowed them to become captives; as they read the OT, they interpreted it as saying that God, the Messiah, would rescue them, yes, but by smiting the Romans.

~AD 0 – “I'll start small”, thought God, but he had big ambitions. Jesus was born.

AD 30-ish – Jesus spoke out against religious domination. He taught, healed and fed people; he asked them to trust that his Father God would rescue them.

AD 32? – Jesus died, rose again, defeated Satan and brought real rescue from the tyranny of sin.

Early centuries AD – Massive explosion of God's love into the world. It spread like wildfire.

So they all lived happily ever after, right? Wrong – see overleaf.

## History of the world – Part 2

~AD 300 – Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and the church began to gain more power, leading to religious domination, leading eventually to...

~AD 1100 – Religio-military domination of the Crusades.

~AD 1100 – Spanish inquisition continued religious domination.

~AD 1400 – Wycliffe attempted to release the Bible from religious domination.

~AD 1500 – Reformation returned focus to trusting in God. But religious domination continued.

Up to present – Religious domination has continued, always based on my (our group's) interpretation of the Bible.

What's at the heart of this religious domination? I guess power is a factor, but I'm wondering if it's actually more based on fear (lack of trust)? Fear can make people do some terrible things.

Jesus taught against religious domination, and he gave up his life to combat it.

Jesus came to fulfil the Old Testament, and in doing so he changed people's interpretation of it.

(To be continued...)

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<sup>17</sup> This is Greg Boyd's thesis in *Cross Vision*. See articles [125–128].

## 146 Changing our minds (Part I)

As I said last time,<sup>[145]</sup> 4000 years ago, God had a massive job on his hands. At the time, everyone thought that the gods (they thought there were lots of them) were angry and needed to be propitiated – thankfully, God knew otherwise. He spotted Abraham and realised he was a one-off.

Abraham was a man of faith; he realised that when God said something, it was a really good idea to trust him, believe in him and follow his leading. And God told Abraham that through him he wanted to bless all the peoples of the earth. So against all the received wisdom of his day, Abraham actually believed that God was a blesser, not a smiter.<sup>18</sup>

Then, for 2000 years, God tried to get this message across: he wanted to bring blessing to people, and to get people to be a blessing to one another – especially to “the stranger and the alien in your midst”. But we wouldn’t listen, and instead we thought that God wanted us to smite our enemies.

In Jesus’ day, it was all about smiting: the Pharisees taught people that God would smite them if they didn’t do what they said was right, and the people wanted God to smite the Romans.

Thankfully, the penny dropped: Jesus made it clear by word and action that God actually wants us to love and to care for and to bless one another. Jesus showed that love can defeat evil by non-violence, and that’s how Jesus defeated Satan! And this Good News spread like wildfire.

(And I’m not reducing the Gospel to “Love is all you need” – far from it: Greg Boyd’s Cross vision has hugely enhanced my view of the radical meaning and significance of the cross.<sup>[124–129]</sup>)

So, as I suggested last time: “They all lived happily ever after.” Except we didn’t, of course.

Did you see the pattern in my 500-word history of the world?<sup>[145]</sup> Did you see how the smiting-God kept reappearing in our thinking, which kept leading us to using religious domination? Doh!

Tragically that allowed the forces of evil to work through “the church” to bring such terrible suffering, such murder and mayhem, all supposedly in the name of Jesus of Nazareth! (Think Crusades, Spanish Inquisition, Catholic/Protestant, etc.)

But we’re much more civilised now, right? We wouldn’t do that sort of thing! Really? Are you sure? What about Christian support for Apartheid or racial segregation or anti-gay feelings? No, our image of a smiting-God is only just under the surface.

And we can smite in non-physical ways too, don’t forget, by applying emotional and societal pressure. We make true statements like, “God loves the person but hates the sin,” but that can be a thin veil. How welcome, I wonder, do gay people feel in my church?!

So what actually is our view of God?<sup>[145]</sup> We just don’t seem able to shake off the idea of God as angry and needing to be propitiated. Please don’t fall for that lie! See God as Jesus portrayed him: a prodigal God running down the road to greet us!

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<sup>18</sup> Yesterday, when I was preparing this article, I looking up a word on the OED website, and I was amazed and amused to see that their ‘Word of the Day’ was ‘smite’!



## 147 Changing our minds (Part II)

One question that has constantly been nagging at me over these past three years is how the blazes did those tiny few disciples explode into a worldwide movement? And so rapidly!

Yes, there was a massive messianic expectation among the Jews (as you would expect, being under Roman domination), but they were looking for a military, smiting solution, whereas the revolution that occurred was a non-violent, enemy-loving solution.

The Romans and the smiting-hungry Jewish leaders (two sworn enemies, remember) joined forces and directed the full weight of their fear-based domination onto one man. But Jesus, by submitting to their violence, triumphed over them!

Even more amazingly, the Romans and the smiting-hungry Jewish leaders joined forces with the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly realms. But Jesus, by submitting to their violence, triumphed over them. Brilliant, just brilliant!

Now I know why the Good News exploded!

And just look what happened to my namesake. He went around imprisoning and killing Jesus' followers, and yet suddenly, there he was, willing to endure suffering in order to promote Jesus' teachings. How, what, why?!

He changed his mind.

I'm guessing that he would have had way more understanding of the Scriptures<sup>19</sup> than the other disciples – he was zealous in his Bible study. And yet there he is, a short while later, travelling the known world, preaching and teaching Jesus' message of hope and joy and release from the slavery of sin and triumph over the forces of evil.

How, what, why?!

Go back a step. Remember the big picture of God's overall plan.<sup>[145]</sup> God's got a world full of people who think he's a smiting-God needing propitiating. God gradually tries to tell them – and they get it to some extent – but those who wrote the Scriptures that were available to Paul did still think of him as a smiting-God.

Paul then encountered enemy-love personified, non-violent victory over the forces of evil, and a true and final exodus – freedom from the slavery of sin.

I feel with Paul, I really do. I can see him getting more and more excited as he reread the Scriptures and saw that there, hidden just beneath the surface, God had placed 'all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge'.

I'm not surprised Paul couldn't quite control his writing skills in order to write in short coherent sentences. It all just came tumbling out. He was just so excited by what he had discovered.

And he found it by being willing to start from scratch and put aside what he had always been taught and reinterpret the Scriptures in terms of Jesus' teaching, Jesus' example, Jesus' own use of the Scriptures – the same God-inspired Scriptures, but they needed reinterpreting.

Like Paul, I studied the Scriptures for years (almost 50 years, drat it!), and I thought I knew what was what. Again like Paul, I tried to persuade people to follow my (version of) faith, but I wasn't happy. I somehow knew that being a Christian was about having a relationship with God, but it didn't feel like something I could put my heart and soul into. It does now!

Praise God!

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<sup>19</sup> I'm guessing that is why he wrote so much more of the NT than the others – I'd never thought of that before.

## 148 Changing our minds (Part III)

I know I have this thing about seeing patterns, but the great plan of God<sup>[145,146]</sup> is very much a game of two halves – 2000 years each way (please forgive the footballing allusion!).

First, we had Abraham and his OT followers through 2000 years where God was trying to banish the bad news of being seen as an angry smiter. Then God led the way, by coming to earth, to kick off the second wonderful half of really, really good news.

People suddenly understood how God came to bring victory over sin and evil, through the cross, a new Exodus where we are released from slavery into a loving community – that’s really Good News. People travelled around the known world, keeping that focus on loving community. Monastics, in particular, showed the way, as centres of healing and hope for the people. Brilliant!

That answered one of my ‘big questions’: “How the heck did Christianity spread so rapidly?!”

Another ‘big question’ I’ve aired, based on my own experience of church life, was, “So if Christianity is supposed to be ‘a relationship with God’, why doesn’t it feel like that?!” And that was answered right at the start of my quest, when I ‘discovered’ the Trinity.[article 0]

But here’s a third ‘big question’, and this has been one of the biggest blocks to my evangelistic efforts for 50 years: “You say I should believe in Jesus, but look at the evil the church has done!”

And, yes, I have total sympathy with unbelievers. How could so much hellish evil have been committed, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth?! Surely, Jesus came to release us from religious domination. I’m thinking Crusades, Spanish Inquisition, Catholic/Protestant wars, Christian-led colonialism and, in modern days, Ku Klux Klan, Apartheid and (I’ll risk adding) clergy child abuse and gay bashing. How, how how?!

Hang on! Maybe I’m seeing another pattern here. Another game of two halves? This time it’s a thousand years each way, but the other way around: first the good news and then the bad news. Am I wrong? All the above are in the second millennium, right?

So is there hope for us in the third millennium? I think there is! I really think God is on the move, wanting once again to release us from religious domination. I’ve seen a few signs, but please share your thoughts and feelings:

- Return to the idea of Trinity as relationship – this kicked off the transformation of my own faith.
- Emphasis on Celtic spirituality and monasticism (by that I mean first millennium monasticism, as community, before it got perverted into religious domination).
- The Bible is no longer a book of two halves. Gone is the (smiting) “God of the Old Testament”! It’s all one big plan of a loving, redeeming, rescuing God, as in Greg Boyd’s Cross Vision.<sup>[124–129]</sup>
- Return to the first-millennium emphasis on the gospel as Christ’s victory over evil, and our being rescued and redeemed, see Derek Flood’s Healing the Gospel.<sup>[50–54,57]</sup> So our evangelism starts with God’s amazing love, not with God’s wrath.

Thank you, Father, for your amazing love.

## 149 Changing our minds IV – Reinterpretation

Question: Is it ever right to reinterpret the Bible? Well, it depends what you mean by reinterpret.

OED: “Interpret: Explain the meaning of (information or actions).”

For example, we might say, “Well, I know what you said, but what did you mean by that!”

OED: “Reinterpret: Interpret (something) in a new or different light.”

So my question becomes: Is it ever right to change our minds about the meaning of the Bible?

Well, that’s a bit radical, so how about: Is it ever right to change our minds about some aspect of the meaning of the Bible?

How do you feel about this? Do you fear that this time I might really be leading you off the rails?

So is it ever right to change our minds about the meaning of the Bible?

I’d say that it’s not only right, but it’s our Christian duty to be willing and prepared to reinterpret the Bible!

Think about my namesake again.<sup>[148]</sup> He interpreted his (OT) Bible in one way. Then he met the risen Jesus Christ, which certainly gave him OED’s ‘new or different light’, and he totally changed his mind about the meaning of the (OT) Bible. This had world-altering consequences, as he became completely obsessed about Jesus and his love, and he was prepared to put up with any amount of persecution to promote this revolutionary new interpretation of the Scriptures.

OK, I’m not trying to be as revolutionary as Paul, but the article I was trying to write, before I bumped into Paul, was to remind you (which I will do anyway) of the conflict (deadly for some) that has come over the years where people have tried to reinterpret the Bible to challenge the received meaning. Issues have included:

- the sun goes around the earth, not vice versa
- Luther’s challenge, leading to the Reformation
- ‘slavery is perfectly acceptable’
- ‘Apartheid is based on biblical principles’
- ‘the Jews killed Jesus so we should kill the Jews’

And more recently (possibly ongoing)

- creation/evolution<sup>20</sup>
- ‘beating children is part of God’s way of discipline’
- ‘God gave us the Earth’s resources to use: “Subdue it”, God said.’

And I’m sure you could think of others.

I believe that, as part of God’s plan to bring us all into better relationships with him and with each other, he is allowing more and more light to seep through into our minds in different ways over the centuries, and we need to trust God, be bold, and be willing to change our minds by seeing things ‘in a new or different light’.

But, historically, we have allowed our fear of reinterpretation to lead us into some of the most horrendous persecutions that you can imagine.

Watch this space.

Paul Bev. 16.07.21

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<sup>20</sup> My appreciation of creation has been considerably enhanced by Walton’s *Lost World of Genesis One*.<sup>[130–133]</sup>

## 150 Changing our minds V – Flood

The friend who challenges my sloppy thinking, asked about my ‘God is not a smiter’ insistence: So how do you interpret the Flood? Good question... and look what I found!

The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, “I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth – men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air – for I am grieved that I have made them.”

Gen 6:5-7 (my bold)

Wow, I’d never seen that before! Despite the view of those through whom the book of Genesis came, that God was angry and needed to be propitiated, look at what this passage says about the pain and grief in God’s heart! Remarkable! That does sound to me like the God-I-see-in-Jesus: God feels pain when we sin.

OK, so was there an actual literal flood? I don’t know, but given all the flood stories in various cultures, I’m guessing there probably was. But, as with the Genesis chapter 1 texts,<sup>[130–133]</sup> if we stop asking, ‘Is this literally true?’ and concentrate on, ‘What is God trying to teach us?’ then the Flood story can be very powerful.

What then is God trying to teach us? One point, of course, is that sin matters. Sin ruins our relationship with one another and with God. But if we trust God, if we have faith in God (point two), and if we work together (point three) – God will protect us in life’s storms. (I said, ‘in’, not ‘from’.)

So yes, we do our part – get together and build the boat (Noah didn’t build that ark on his own!) and we trust God and actually get into the boat.

And God does his part: he protected them from the adverse weather conditions. ‘Then the LORD shut him in.’ (v16), i.e. God sealed the boat from the outside to protect it and them.

Then maybe the main point is the covenant: ‘I will establish my covenant with you’ (v18) – God’s one-sided promise of protection. Not, ‘If you do so-and-so then I will look after you...’ Again, what a counter-cultural image of God!

My friend might say, ‘But you’ve avoided the issue, Paul. You used bold in that first quote to avoid us noticing I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth – men and animals...!’ There’s the smiter! That doesn’t sound like God-in-Jesus.’

Exactly! I see that as the voice of the writer(s) of Genesis, viewing God the way everyone did at that time.

We have to interpret the meaning behind each Bible passage in the light of the fact that the author(s) had a wrong view of God; thus we catch glimpses (through the Holy Spirit’s inspiration) of the real, loving, dying, self-sacrificing God (see Boyd’s Cross Vision<sup>[124–129]</sup>).

And today, are we humble enough to admit that we too have a wrong view of God? If so, as we read our Bibles and if we ask, ‘What meaning does God want us to see?’, we will be able to interpret the passages, through the Spirit’s inspiration, and pick up the meaning that God wants us to get from it today, which might be different from people’s previous views.

Can our view of God get less wrong, century on century? I do hope so!

Paul Bev. 19.7.21

## ***151 History of the world – explained!***

My ‘History of the world in 500 words’<sup>[145]</sup> was based on a diagram that I drew/wrote (see below), and from that overview, here I’ve come to some conclusions.

I started the diagram to illustrate the progression in our idea of what God is like: from one of the violent gods, needing to be propitiated, to a loving Father, racing down the road to greet us – yet still Someone who Rules in Glory and Splendour.

The other thing I’ve been grappling with is why did it all go so horribly wrong? How is it even thinkable that so much evil could have been done in the name of Jesus?!

I’ve come to the conclusion that the whole aim of God’s ‘first half’ culminated in the defeat of evil through Christ on the cross, to establish Christ’s kingdom on earth.

The ‘second half’ started well, because the Good news of the kingdom spread like wildfire, with people focusing on the defeat of evil, using the kingdom’s non-violent love-based ‘war’ (Eph 6).

So what went wrong? Just like the Pharisees, we started to argue about what was right and what was wrong, who was right and who was wrong, who was out and who was in. And this even started in the first century – just read the New Testament.

Maybe this constant emphasis on right and wrong (as opposed to good defeating evil) is why I haven’t seen the incredible love of Christ has spreading like wildfire (or have I, of late)?

In my church experience, we have mainly focused on personal salvation – we say our church is ‘cross-focused’, but mainly in the sense of ‘getting saved’. Then for those who are now ‘in’, we emphasise discipleship – Bible study, prayer, worship and service to the community.

Sorry, but I no longer feel able to dedicate my whole life to that model of ‘being a Christian’.

My current journey started when I ‘discovered’ the Trinity – but there again you see, it was focused on a wonderful sense of my own personal relationship with God. I’m not knocking it – it’s such a joy – but it’s still too much about me! Doh!

OK, I’m managing to analyse some of the problems, but what’s the solution?

Maybe it’s as simple and as profound as this: Where I am today, I will work with all my heart and soul and strength to build the community of Christ, praying for God’s power to overcome evil, and to draw others into that community.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Paul Bev. 23.07.21

**EVIL**

Smiting Domination  
Exclusion In/Out  
us/Them

2000 BC

Bible writers' view of God: "Angry", Needs sacrifice "Smites people"

1000 BC

Moses: "God smites Egyptians"  
David "God smites enemies"  
"God is pleased when we smite our enemies"

BC/AD

"God will smite the Romans"

All going rather

AD 1000

DOMINATION  
Crusades  
Pogroms  
Inquisition  
Church domination  
Indulgences  
(Reformation)  
Colonialism

AD 2000

Mass slavery  
Gay persecution  
Commercial domination  
Commercial slavery  
Earth exploitation

**GOOD**

Blessing Inclusion  
Protection Understanding  
Release Reduce suffering

Abraham "Bless the whole world"

God allows exile

God rescues Jews  
God protects Jews  
God allows Egyptians to perish

God provides a land by protecting Jews

God smites Satan  
God allows evil to kill Jesus (Aribido principle)

CHRIST'S KINGDOM

Love prevails  
Explosion of love  
Community (Celtic Xnty)  
Inclusion  
Earth care  
Mutual support

DEFEAT OF EVIL

Bible for the people

Individualism  
Mechanism  
"Systematic theology"

Science (Neutral?)

Chinese science

Egyptian science

Islamic science

Rationalism (led by Xns)

Modern science  
"we don't need God"

????????

## ***152 Changing our minds VI – Thinking about sex***

Apparently, men think about sex a lot; I know I do, and especially so these past few months. But that's because I've been trying to think biblically: what does the Bible teach about sex, sexuality, gender? And today I'm thinking about gender in relation to leadership. So what does the Bible teach?

1 Timothy 3:12 Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well.

1 Corinthians 14:34 Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law.

1 Timothy 2:12 But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.

So the Bible is pretty clear, isn't it? Women should NOT lead in the church!

Yes, I know what the world's culture says, but we must not be swayed by our secular, godless society! The Bible is clear, from end to end, Genesis to Revelation: men and women are to be complementary – neither more important than the other, but the male role is chiefly to lead.

(I based the above on an actual website, but I won't give you its reference – it wouldn't be good for your blood pressure!)

Sorry to be such a devil's advocate, but I feel it's really, really important when we come to interpret the Bible, that we first acknowledge just how strong our prejudices can be.

The Bible was written, both OT and NT, within a male-dominated society, so even though the Bible is inspired by God, it is still going to be affected by its society's views. Jesus' attitude to women was totally counter-cultural, and the fact that the NT shows some of the churches being led by women was revolutionary! That to me is the Holy Spirit's inspiration.

Indeed, we should be grateful that 'the world' has fought back against male domination; this has done the church a big favour, I feel. OK, the more extreme elements are less than helpful, but if we're humble enough, the church can learn things from 'the world', can't it?! Does God want us to learn new things, as a church, things that will help us to improve human relationships? Or does (our interpretation of) the Bible have all the answers? Some people say, 'The Bible says it; that settles it!'

Now, there's a growing number of Bible-believing Christians who believe that, just as male-dominated church leadership is a reflection of society's views in Bible times, saying that gay sex is a perversion (Rom 1:27) is not an immutable principle on which to base our sexual ethics.

But the really important issue here is how we, as Christians, relate to one another if and when we disagree.

Let us pray, be humble, and be gentle with one another.

Paul Bev. 29.7.21

## ***153 Changing our minds VII – Beware binary thinking***

Only having a grade 9 (= super-fail) in O level history hasn't stopped me writing 'A history of the world in 500 words', so today, despite being an almost totally apolitical animal (a terrible admission, sorry) I'm going to talk about politics.

I find politics frustrating because I can see good ideas on both sides, and yet I have to choose one or the other. Why the blazes can't they find a middle ground and work together to help solve society's problems?! But no, each

portrays the other's ideas as wrong, full stop. And so if there were some aspect where they thought, 'Ah, that's actually a good idea!' they could not, as a matter of principle, run with it: If 'they' say it, it must be wrong. Beware binary polarisation!

In the past few years, I have changed my mind on a number of aspects of my belief, and OK, I'm sometimes deliberately provocative (and I've disagreed with myself more than once!) but you've been very gracious and you continue to pray for me and encourage me. Thank you!

Some of you have tried to convince me that my interpretation is mistaken, and in the past few days, have recommended one sermon and one book, on different topics – but both made me very cross. That's not because I disagreed with their view, but because of how they put it across.

As with politics, each set out clearly what 'they' say, and then contrasted it with 'but the Bible says...'; indeed, the subtitle of the book was 'A clear, concise look at what the Bible teaches.' The preacher started by saying that he would give us two stories: the story as told by 'the sexual revolution' (whatever that is) and the story as told by the Bible.

So what 'they' say is wrong, but we know the truth because we have the authority of the Bible.

Neither seemed willing to accept that their view was actually based on an interpretation of scripture, but rather presented it almost as fact.

Neither seemed humble enough to accept that it is possible for Christians to change their interpretation over time, in the light of new information and new understanding.

Both pictured the opposition as having been influenced by 'the world' and as using emotive arguments.

Both told us that some Christians were changing their beliefs because they were not willing to face up to the 'difficult truths' of what the Bible teaches – itself an emotive argument!

The sermon was around LGBT issues, and the book (admittedly written in 1988) was trying to convince us that 'Leadership is male' (that's its title), and that women should not lead in church.

So let us pray, be humble, and be gentle with one another, especially where we disagree.

Paul Bev. 3.8.21

## ***154 Changing our minds VIII – “The letter kills”***

Probably a terrible thing to say (but when has that ever stopped me?!), but with my editor's hat on I think that Paul, like me, probably wasn't actually a terribly good writer – with all those long, rambling sentences! And I wonder what he would have thought of the thousands of PhDs and books on the finer points of his teachings. But don't worry, I do think he was inspired by God – really inspired!

Something I thought of when I awoke yesterday led me to think of 'we with unveiled face behold the glory of the Lord', so I looked at 2 Cor 3 – typically 'excited' – he just can't stop talking about 'glory' and 'Spirit/spirit'. As I read it, it seemed very relevant to this mini-series.

He's really excited by the new covenant, but sad that people are locked into the old. Now there's nothing wrong with the old, he insists – it was a glorious and necessary part of God's Big Plan. The danger is that we can be so focused on the old (letter) that we miss out on the new (spirit).

And 'the letter kills'!



The ‘letter’ is not unimportant but if it is overemphasised, the greater glory of life, love, spirit, freedom (read the passage, it’s bubbling!) gets overshadowed, veiled.

Now, what are Christians known for? Yes, OK, people do see that Christians have been – and still are – involved in some wonderful caring work, but how do we come across, chiefly?

We feel it’s our job to tell ‘them’ what’s right and what’s wrong – we’re being ‘salt and light’.

But we even do it to ourselves! OK, we no longer hate and murder each other over the right interpretation of Paul’s teaching, but we can become obsessed by it (yes, I admit it, I’m obsessional too!), and so we read our ideas into our Bibles.

And because we translate our Bibles on the basis of our interpretation of the Bible, those of us without any knowledge of Greek and Hebrew are stuck with believing what we are told to believe.

The book I referred to yesterday was by a highly respected Christian leader whose sermons have helped countless people over the years, including me. But I think he has read back his idea of ‘leadership is male’ into Genesis. He believes the principle he reads from the relationship of Adam and Eve is that Adam’s sin was that failed to lead as he should, and ‘Eve, as typical woman, was more likely to be misled and therefore more likely to mislead’ and so she misled Adam (OK, that was written 33 years ago).

Similarly, we need to be very careful in our ‘reading’ of Scripture on the LGBT issue. Have church leaders read their interpretation back into the translation, and also, are we taking sufficient account of the cultural influences in the OT days and on Paul (and Peter)?

So let us pray, be humble and be gentle with one another, especially where we disagree.

Paul Bev. 6.8.21

## **155 Changing our minds IX – The bad news**

I know I tend to analyse everything, but why do I still feel so excited about my faith – as excited as when I came to faith 55 years ago, and again in 1985, when I re-found God’s love for me?

Four years ago, having moved house we went to a new church. We both felt immediately at home. Why? We were made so welcome – and everyone we spoke to said the same; it’s just such a welcoming community. But the other thing we noticed was that it consisted of people from a really wide range of churchmanships. Interesting, eh?!

I’ve ‘worked on’ my faith these past four years, challenging myself to think why I believed things, and looking at Scripture but refusing to just accept what I’d always been taught.

I still base my beliefs on the Bible, but the way I interpret the Scriptures has changed. Some might say that I’ve gone too far, but I’ve learned from St Ed’s that you don’t have to believe exactly the same things as each other in order to love each other and work together to build God’s kingdom.

The other thing I’ve wrestled with is how the blazes have Christians, through the centuries, done so much harm to other people, both believers and non-believers? So here I start with the bad news, and the next article will be the good news.

What did the man Christ Jesus spend most time battling against? He was trying to teach people how to live in love with God and with one another, but he was bombarded (and eventually killed) by those whose main preoccupation (with the best of motives!) was religion. Here’s a summary from a late 2018 article<sup>[12]</sup> of the alternative that Jesus was offering:

| <b>Religion</b> | <b>Relationship</b> |
|-----------------|---------------------|
| fear            | love / worship      |

|                          |                        |
|--------------------------|------------------------|
| shame                    | restoration / adoption |
| estrangement             | reconciliation         |
| isolation                | community / communion  |
| rejection                | acceptance             |
| worthlessness            | supreme value          |
| punishment               | (repeated) forgiveness |
| exact meaning ('letter') | spirit                 |
| doing                    | being                  |
| speaking                 | listening              |
| obedience                | faithful questioning   |
| wrath                    | grace                  |
| word                     | spirit                 |
| knowing right and wrong  | enemy love             |

Then, from an article of mid 2019<sup>[72]</sup> an illustration of how we misinterpret Scripture by applying it to the wrong audience. We think that if 'it's a scriptural truth', it must apply to everyone. No! We don't teach psychological truths (however true they are) to a naughty three-year-old! Watch how we can misuse God's word by applying it to an inappropriate group:

| Scripture                                                   | Spoken to                | About                                                       | We apply to   | To say                                    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Romans 6:23<br>(the wages of sin)                           | believers                | life in Jesus                                               | non-believers | 'Repent or perish!'                       |
| Romans 1 (wrath of God revealed against sin) <sup>[8]</sup> | believers                | 'Don't you dare judge other people! Rom 2:1' <sup>[8]</sup> | non-believers | 'You deserve to be punished for your sin' |
| Jn 14:6 (the way, the truth and the life)                   | Jesus' closest disciples | how to get closer to the Father                             | non-believers | 'Jesus is the only way to be saved'       |

Next, I'll mention some specific ways my own interpretation has changed – for the better, hopefully.

Paul Bev. 8.8.21

## 156 CoM 10 – Genesis 1–3, a new (old?) reading

(The second part, 'the good news', will follow shortly, but here is an interruption to our scheduled programme...)

When you want to interpret a passage of Scripture, you need a framework or a thought pattern as a way of making sense of it, especially when the passage is not literal but rather allegorical. I think the technical term is a hermeneutic.

My hermeneutic today is relationship. I've looked again at Genesis 1–3 and tried to understand its significance on the basis that 'Being a Christian is about having a relationship with God', which seems pretty safe ground for a hermeneutic, right?

I see Genesis 1 as God creating a place where that relationship can happen. I was really helped by John Walton's *Lost World of Genesis One*.<sup>[130–133]</sup> He sees creation not as the 'manufacturing of a thing' – the universe – but rather as 'creating a place'. So God creates humankind in order to have a relationship with us, and in Genesis 1 God enters that place.

And it was 'good' (five times) and then 'very good'. So I read 'good' as good relationships.

In Genesis 2&3, it all goes pear-shaped. How and why? At first, Adam and Eve had a great relationship with God, but it went wrong when they failed to trust God. I won't say that 'sin' entered, rather I'll temporarily use the term 'untrust'. If you don't trust someone, it spoils the relationship – as we all know from bitter experience.

‘Did God really say...?’ the thought comes in, so doubt or untrust starts.

‘You will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ Great! If we know what’s right and wrong, we won’t need to trust God. (Bad idea!)

Untrust then leads to fear: ‘I was afraid,’ says Adam...

...then blame: ‘It was her fault!’ and ‘The snake (implied: that you created) deceived me.’

More relationship breakdown: ‘Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over over.’ and ‘Cursed is the ground because of you.’

Humans were made by God and were originally good – six times it says so. But through untrust, all the relationships were broken: human to human, human to God, human to creation.

Help! We need a way to restore all those relationships.

Thank God, there was a plan, right from Day One. Just as God entered the perfect world of Genesis 1, so God entered the world of untrust, with all its suffering, in order to restore that trust, to undo the untrust.

‘Jesus died for us,’ as Christians have said in their creeds<sup>[16]</sup> since very early days. But how is never mentioned in the creeds.

Jesus put his trust in humans and that trust was destroyed, big time! Jesus received all the terrible consequences of untrust: evil, suffering, pain and rejection. But he conquered! He broke through and, by non-violent means, he conquered the ultimate enemy – death.

‘For Christ died for untrust, once for all, the totally trusting for the untrusting, to bring us back into a trusting relationship with God.’ (1 Peter 3:18)

What a glorious gospel!

Paul Bev. 8.8.21

## ***157 Changing our minds XI – The good news***

As I explained in my 2017 article,<sup>[0]</sup> ten years ago I totally lost my faith (‘Does God exist?!’) and then spent 5/6 years rebuilding it. But I did so along exactly the same biblical lines as before, and I wasn’t happy – not until I rediscovered God’s love (2017) and moved to St Ed’s (2018).

As I started to face up to some of the things about my faith for which I felt I had to apologise to my non-believing friends and family,<sup>[1]</sup> I gradually realised that no apologies were needed – the God of the Bible really was wonderful in every way, overflowing with love and acceptance. All I needed to apologise for was my mistaken interpretations of the Bible.

That’s what I’ve been working through in these past 156 articles – gradually thinking out where I’ve gone wrong. So here’s currently where I’m at, my overview of the Bible, which I now use in order to interpret some of the detail, especially some of the contradictory bits.

God is love – pretty indisputable – and ‘He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.’ (2 Pet 3:9) That’s what any loving parent would want, right?

God is covenantal – making promises to his people.

God is inclusive – insisting that his people should welcome the alien and the stranger.

God is relationship – Father, Son, Holy Spirit

God enters the world – at creation and again at incarnation, in order to cement that relationship.

God is good – therefore his creation is fundamentally good; humans are fundamentally good.<sup>21</sup>

God gives humans freewill, otherwise it wouldn't be love – but that's where the trouble starts.

And God is unreasonably forgiving – repeatedly, unfairly forgiving! (Ask Jonah about that.)

That's the basis of my faith in the God of the Bible. What follows from those assumptions?

The church has to be community-based and open, welcoming the alien and the stranger.

Anyone can belong, no-one is excluded – you belong first and, in time, you can come to believe.

Sin is a serious problem – it breaks relationships – so take it seriously.

It's so serious that the only solution was the cross – Jesus died for our sins.

Evil in all its forms is serious – it destroys people – so take it seriously.

It's so serious that the only solution was the cross – Jesus died to defeat evil.

Suffering is a serious problem – it can even break relationships – so take it seriously.

It's so serious that the only solution was the cross – Jesus entered into it and died.

What should be our response?

Worship this amazing God!

Work together to defeat sin and evil and suffering.

Celebrate our differences.

Care for one another, especially the alien and the stranger.

Well, that's where I've got to so far, but the journey is continuing!

Paul Bev. 10.8.21

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<sup>21</sup> Yes, I realise some of you will baulk at that last clause. We can discuss it later, but that's my current view.

## 158 A bridge too far

It's 2000 BC, right, and you're God, and you want to show the people of the world just how much you love them, and how you want to have a relationship with them. But you have a problem. All the people think you're an angry God who will smite them if they do things wrong. Problem!

You know the Abraham story, right? *Through you, I will bless all the peoples of the earth*, and Abe believes God, Abe trusts God, Abe is willing to do what God says.

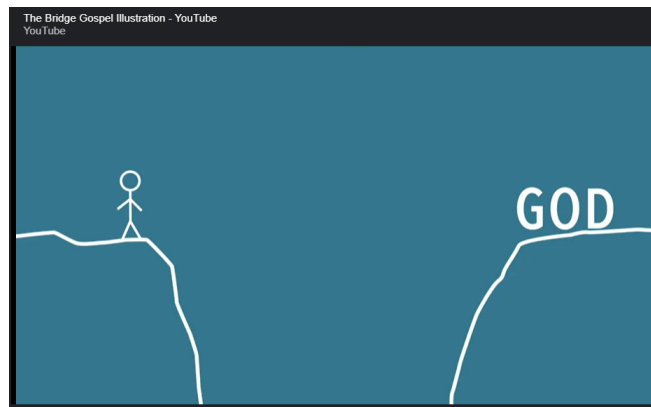
So Isaac is born, but then God says, *I want you to offer your son as a sacrifice*. What?! Can you see what a **serious** problem God has with his image – he needs a major PR makeover to convince people that he's **not** an angry God who will smite you if you do wrong.

Long story short: 2000 years later, Jesus comes, dies, comes back to life, and the PR battle is won! People realise: God really is **not** a demanding tyrant who will smite you if you do wrong; God is a loving, accepting, welcoming, **self-sacrificing** God. Jesus, God's only **Son** sacrifices **himself**, the **lamb** of God who died for us. The good news spreads like wildfire. **Hallelujah!**

Skip forward another 2000 years and ask Google how we can tell our friends and family about this **good news**. Look up 'the bridge', a 5 min video based on Romans 6:23, 'You can draw this on a napkin,' the presenter says, 'circling the individual words of the verse as you explain it.'

the [WAGES] of [SIN] is [DEATH],  
but the [GIFT] [OF GOD] is [ETERNAL LIFE] in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Skipping quickly over the fact that this verse has been ripped totally out of context,<sup>1</sup> let's see what this says about the nature of God.



Here are the verses the speaker recommends we use (my bold):

Isaiah 59:2 But your **iniquities** have **separated** you from your God;

'Sins are the things we think and do and say that are not pleasing to God.'

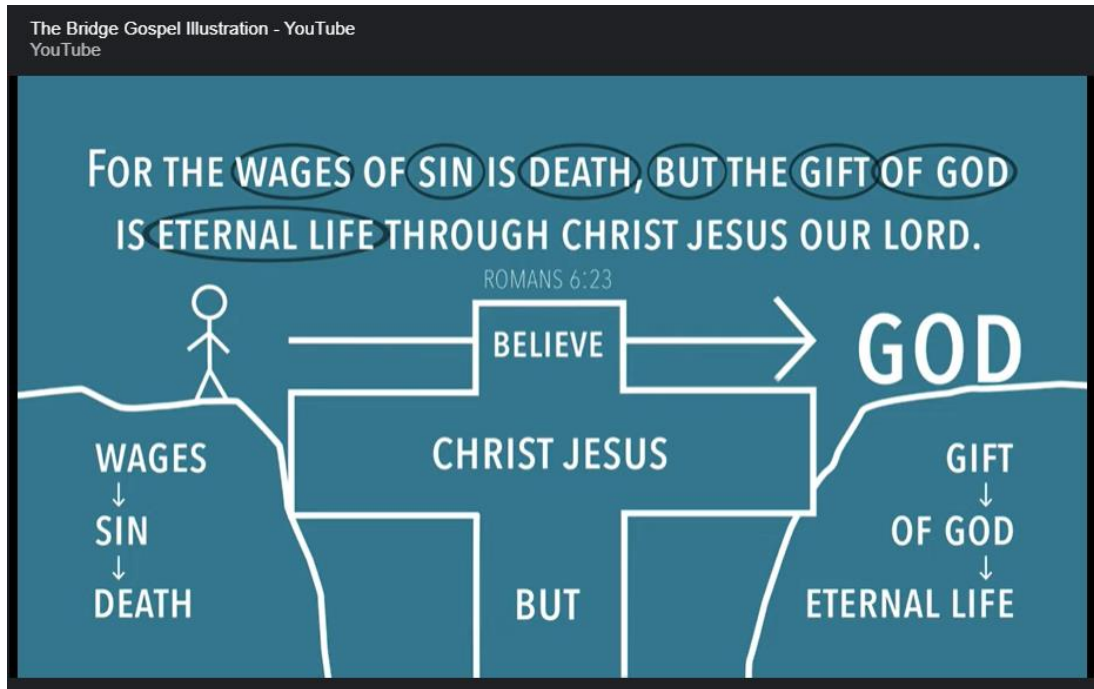
Hebrews 9:27 Just as man is **destined to die** once, and after that to **face judgment**

'Tell them about heaven and hell.'

John 5:24 I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be **condemned**; he has crossed over from **death** to life.

‘Remind them about heaven and hell.’

So here’s the finished picture, drawn on your napkin:



*Somebody shoot the PR agent!*

What did I just say? **At last they realised that God really is not a demanding tyrant, who will smite you if you don’t do right.**

The PR agent is using a 4000-year-old (wrong!) image of God, despite it being totally overturned by Jesus himself **2000 years ago.**

What is Jesus’ image of the Father? When the prodigal son shows even the **slightest** inclination to return home, the Father sees him coming, hitches up his skirts, races down the road, embraces his pig-shit-covered son. ‘Get the robe! Get the ring! Let’s have a party!’

THAT is what I call good news!

Paul Bev. 12.8.21

<sup>1</sup> The PR agent has overheard Paul talking to already-believers. Paul was saying, “You have trusted God, believed in Jesus, yet you’re going on sinning. How stupid is that?! Don’t you know that the effect of sinning is to kill your relationship with God; the God who freely gave you eternal life. Duh! What’s not to understand?!”

## **159 A bridge too far – Penalty?**

I have a good friend who won’t let me get away with anything in what I say here, and his pushing and probing have been really helpful to me. Thanks, John! (not his real name)

John thinks that I overemphasise the idea that God, in the OT, is to be seen as a smiting God: He said, *Thinking about Abraham being asked to sacrifice his son doesn't speak to me about a 'smiting God'; this would have been par for the course in the society from which Abraham was called.*

Exactly! God was trying to draw people *away* from the 'par for the course in the society' view, to a better view. But changing people's cultural understanding is really hard.

*The outcome [of Abraham's actions in obeying what he heard God say] is a lesson pointing to God's love and not to his 'smiting' nature.*

Yes, indeed. The experience showed Abraham that God was *not* the kind of god as seen by the tribes around him, who thought child sacrifice was acceptable.

But then again, Abraham *himself* must have had at least a *similar* world view; after all, he thought God might actually be demanding child sacrifice.

*But in the rest of the article,<sup>[158]</sup> the need for Jesus' redemptive sacrifice has no meaning unless it is referenced to the penalty of sin.*

Sure, if we weaken the seriousness of sin, then the cross loses its power and importance, but in my articles, I'm not weaken its seriousness, am I?<sup>[157]</sup>

Sin is serious all right; it's the idea of 'penalty' that I have difficulty with.

Now, I've often claimed here that Jesus shows us what God is *really* like, so **does Jesus speak about a penalty or punishment for sin?** Let's check.

In my NIV Bible, Jesus doesn't use the word 'penalty', so what about words starting "punish...":

Matt 23:14 (+ Mark 12, parallel) is applied to Pharisees.

Matt 25 'eternal punishment' (not just ordinary punishment!) will be meted out to those who... ..don't feed the hungry, clothe the naked, etc. Curious!<sup>[60]</sup>

Luke 12:22 Again aimed (I think) against the Pharisees

Luke 20 The Pharisees cop it again.

Luke 21 End-times punishment. I'm not clear who is being punished, sorry.

So then, it seems to me that **Jesus never said anyone would be punished for their sins**, so should we be talking in those terms?

And what happened when Jesus (John 8:1-11) encountered someone caught in clear and patent sin (adultery)? He actually *defied* the law by stopping people carrying out the rightful punishment for such sin.

So the theme I've been using, almost throughout my writings, is that God is only interested in restoration, not retribution. It seems to me that Jesus reinterpreted the OT in that way, and I'm trying to do the same.

## 160 A bridge too far – John 3:16

But John<sup>[159]</sup> came back to me...

*In answer to your question about what Jesus says about punishment or penalty for sin, what about John 3:16-18? What is your interpretation of Jesus' forthright 'condemnation' of unbelievers?*

OK, sorry, I missed that passage because I only did word searches for 'punish' and 'penalty'.

Before we look at that passage, let's remind ourselves of a general principle: when we read a passage, we have to interpret it in light of the rest of the Bible. In other words, when we read any given Bible passage, we 'read' it (i.e. we interpret it) in terms of the general way we see the teaching of the Bible as a whole.

The 'traditional' view of the Bible (certainly in the second millennium, and especially after the Reformation) has been in terms of crime (sin) and punishment (penalty), but the thing that has transformed my life is learning to see the Bible through the lens of God's overwhelming desire to **restore** all humankind.

So could what Jesus says in John 3 fit with my newer reading? Yes, I think it could. And could we also interpret 'condemnation' in that passage in terms of punishment. Yes, possibly, but if that is the *only* occurrence of that idea in Jesus' teaching, then we would need to be doubly sure of our interpretation. To see it in terms of God punishing unbelievers, would be going against the grain of the rest of Jesus' teaching.<sup>[159]</sup>

But let's see...

*16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

If we choose not to believe, then we are cutting ourselves off from the source of (eternal) life, so yes, we will perish, but God isn't *causing* us to perish – God wants us to believe and receive.

*17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

Exactly so, God doesn't *want* to condemn anyone; God wants to restore the world.

*18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*

Now here's the nearest we get to the sin/penalty 'stands condemned' interpretation. Doesn't this imply 'condemned by God'?

Actually, I don't think it does: if we *choose* not to believe, we are cutting ourselves off from the source of life, so we 'stand condemned' in the sense that we are condemning ourselves to death.

I don't think I have distorted the meaning of the text, have I? But if we're thinking in terms of sin/penalty we read it one way, and if we're looking for restoration, there it is. And that's why I'm so excited in my faith these days.

Paul Bev. 16.8.21



## 161 A bridge too far – CS Lewis

My friend John<sup>[159,160]</sup> came back to me with a recent web-based “daily thought from CS Lewis” (see below) which I’ve struggled with for a week.

Lewis refers to how “*a Christian trembles [at] the thought of God’s judgement*”, and also speaks of “*the terrible parable of the Sheep and the Goats [which] can leave no conscience untouched, for in it the ‘Goats’ are condemned entirely for their sins of omission...*” (my bold)

As I admitted over two years ago,<sup>[60]</sup> that parable is very confusing: it seems to say that we will go to “eternal punishment” if we don’t help the poor, the marginalised, the rejected. What?!

I reacted very strongly to Lewis’s comments above, and I have spent literally hours writing and rewriting this article, trying to show how Lewis is mistaken in his interpretation of Scripture.

But Lewis’s mistake – and my mistake! – is thinking in terms of **who is accepted and who is rejected**. We are back to that bridge analogy,<sup>[158]</sup> which starts with our separation and says:

[REJECTED] + [Belief in Jesus] => [ACCEPTED]

Now, I know this goes against all I’ve ever been taught by the church, but I totally reject the bridge model and would claim that this is closer to Jesus’ teaching:

[ACCEPTED] + [Belief (trust) in Jesus] => [Living as ACCEPTED]

After all, as I have already said,<sup>[159]</sup> I can’t see Jesus ever condemning anyone (other than the Pharisees) – unless you can see some other passage that I have missed?

And the bridge model is totally contrary to Jesus’ prodigal father teaching because the prodigal father **never rejected the son**; and the son **never stopped being his son**.

I think that insisting on the bridge model is a form of indoctrination that Christendom has inflicted on itself at least since the Reformation and probably for most of the second millennium.

Let’s rebel! Let’s get back to the **really good news**, as preached by the early church: that God loves us and, through the cross, God defeated evil; and God is constantly urging us, for our own sakes, to stop sinning because it harms us and harms others (Romans 6:23).

I have already shared my joy at being part of my new church and expressed it as being “such a welcoming church.” I now realise that’s because it’s a “prodigal father church” – everyone is accepted, regardless of where they are on their journey. We just accept each other and encourage each other to draw closer to our loving heavenly Father, through Christ who lives in us all.

No, we’re not universalists – people can and sadly do reject their prodigal father. And we’re not soft on sin because, as Paul says to the believers, “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (op cit).

Paul Bev. 25.8.21

CS Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (my bold)

If there is any thought at which a **Christian trembles it is the thought of God’s ‘judgement’**. The ‘Day’ of Judgement is ‘that day of wrath, that dreadful day’. We pray for God to deliver us ‘in the hour of death and at the

day of judgement'. Christian art and literature for centuries have depicted its terrors. This note in Christianity certainly goes back to the teaching of Our Lord Himself; especially to **the terrible parable of the Sheep and the Goats. This can leave no conscience untouched, for in it the 'Goats' are condemned entirely for their sins of omission**; as if to make us fairly sure that the heaviest charge against each of us turns not upon the things he has done but on those he never did—perhaps dreamed of doing.

It was therefore with great surprise that I first noticed how the Psalmists talk about the judgement of God. Judgement is apparently an occasion of universal rejoicing. People ask for it: 'Judge me, O Lord my God, according to thy righteousness' (35:24).

The reason for this soon becomes very plain. The ancient Jews, like ourselves, think of God's judgement in terms of an earthly court of justice. The difference is that the Christian pictures the case to be tried as a criminal case with himself in the dock; the Jew pictures it as a civil case with himself as the plaintiff. The one hopes for acquittal, or rather for pardon; the other hopes for a resounding triumph with heavy damages.

## ***162 Journeyings – Where are we going?***

From 1987 to 2008, I published a monthly subscription magazine about computers; in the first few issues I established a half-page 'Godslot' – almost 240 'thoughts' about the Christian faith.

I knew then that **I was right**, and my job was to try to goad the unbelieving readers into thinking about the claims of Jesus. A worthy cause? Well, I know of at least two people for whom those articles were a step on their journey to finding faith.

But here, in these 162 articles, it's me who is on the journey, hoping to (re-)find my faith, and it seems to be working – I'm getting more and more excited as I journey.

How many people do you know who started their journey – as I did – with great excitement but then, over time, the fire grew cold? Is that you? Or members of your family? Or your church?

As I journey now, the feeling is growing in me that it's **not actually our fault**. Something has gone wrong, very wrong – fundamentally wrong – with the Christian religion. In my articles, I keep using the phrase, "we've always been taught",<sup>22</sup> and I keep questioning if it really is right.

What do we **say** about our faith? It's about having a relationship with the creator of the universe; God loves us very much; Jesus died on the cross to take away our sin. Isn't that fantastic?!

"Well, yes, of course it is!" I used to say, trying to convince myself.

One of the stages on my own journey was to take a good long honest look at the Old Testament, and I didn't like what I saw. (You too?!) Well, what has helped me most on that issue is to see the big picture of the Bible:

- Abraham was a man of his time – he thought God was angry and needed to be placated.
- The OT authors thought very much the same but, inspired by the Holy Spirit, they put pointers into their writings that were nearer to what God was really like.
- Then Jesus came to earth and showed the people of his time what God is **really** like.

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<sup>22</sup> Just checked: "always been taught" occurs 37 times in 162 articles!

Finally, two very significant journeys: the Emmaus road (I absolutely love that story!) and the Damascus road. In each case, the protagonists knew their (OT) Bibles, but Jesus opened their eyes to see it in a new light – to see those pointers that the Holy Spirit had inspired, and suddenly the whole thing made sense. Talk about exciting!

That's why, inspired by the Holy Spirit, belief in Jesus absolutely exploded over the next few short years. It was all there, in the Old Testament, waiting to be uncovered.

What has gone so wrong? You'll have to wait for the next exciting episode of "Journeys"!

Paul Bev. 30.8.21

## ***163 Journeys – What has gone wrong?***

Ask yourself, what are the basics of your faith? I've tried to suggest (though I might be wrong) that for most Christians these days, it's basically about "having a relationship with God". Now, God is holy, and we are not, so we have a problem, but Jesus came to die for us so now we can be brought back into a right relationship with God. (And although we don't like to talk about it, we know what happens to those who don't believe, don't we?!)

So, if that's the central idea of our faith, what impression do you think unbelievers have of our God? Positive or negative? Sounds pretty negative to me! And we exacerbate it by our doctrine of original sin: before I have made a single decision in my life, I am condemned to hell. Really?!

What kind of God would deal people a hand like that? Does that sound like good news? Is that the basis on which the early church expanded like wildfire? No way!

Let me suggest an alternative, and this, I believe, is actually the "lost message" of the early church (please argue with me if you think I'm wrong):

Human beings are intrinsically good. They are made by a good God, and God doesn't make rubbish – we are "in God's image", for goodness sake! So I believe in the doctrine of original goodness.

And when unbelievers are loving and caring and selfless and just plain GOOD, then we shouldn't be in the least surprised – they too are inhabited by a loving God, who is expressing love through them. They too are children of their loving Father – they just don't realise it yet.

But it doesn't take a genius to realise that we all tend to be selfish and therefore we can spoil our relationships with one another and with God.

What's more, there are very real forces of evil, trying to mess up the good things that God wants to bring to human kind. We need to fight against those evil forces (Eph 6) in the way that Jesus did – using non-violent God-inspired methods.

So the form of the "good" news that we've always been taught it is firstly unchrist-like in its negativity, and secondly it's incredibly emaciated. It's basically only about me and my salvation – whether I get to heaven. And what does it have to say about the massive problems of the world, the environment, wars, refugees, etc.? Absolutely nothing!

Well, maybe if I'm saved I'm fairly well motivated so I try to help, but (tell me if I'm wrong) a much stronger motivation of this "good" news is that we have to take time and effort to share it – how else will the world be saved?!

No, the message of the early church was, I believe, that Jesus the Christ is Lord! Having believed in Jesus, I have acknowledged that Christ is the Lord of my life and, more importantly, Christ is Lord of the whole universe.

## 164 Journeings – Where did it go so horribly wrong?

So how on earth did we start from something so exciting, so universal, so world-winning, so Christ-centred as the faith of the early church, and turn it into something so negative, so self-focused, so moralistic, so pharisaic?

I think the key is how we view God. Is our God the loving heavenly (prodigal) father that Jesus portrayed?

I'm not sure if my table will help, but I offer it anyway. It seeks to track the changes as God has tried to draw humankind away from the negative view that Abraham and his contemporaries had, and to gradually lead them away from a retributive view to a restorative view.

|            | <b>Idea of God – our relation to God</b>                                                                                                                                                                   | <b>Who thought that?</b>                                        | <b>Did anyone disagree?</b>                                                          |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2000 BC    | God needs sacrifices in order to be placated                                                                                                                                                               | Everyone                                                        | Not really                                                                           |
| 1000 BC    | God needs sacrifices in order to be placated                                                                                                                                                               | Most of the Jews, certainly                                     | (Beginning to be hints in the Psalms and the prophets' writings of a different view) |
| 0 BC       | God rejects those who sin – sin leads to hell                                                                                                                                                              | Pharisees, certainly                                            |                                                                                      |
| AD 30      | Jesus: "God is like the prodigal father"                                                                                                                                                                   | A tax collector, a prostitute and a few fishermen               | Everyone else, especially the Pharisees                                              |
|            | <b>Death and Resurrection of Jesus</b>                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                 |                                                                                      |
| AD 40      | <i>We are loved and accepted; but beware, because sin separates (e.g. Paul says to <b>Christians</b>: "The wages of sin is death")</i>                                                                     | Original disciples + Paul + a growing movement called 'The way' | Everyone else, especially the Pharisees                                              |
| AD 60–100+ | <i>We are loved and accepted, but beware, sin separates</i>                                                                                                                                                | All of Christendom                                              |                                                                                      |
| ~AD 1000   | Things start going a bit awry? -> Christians start killing Muslims -> Christians start killing Christians! + Christian-based imperialism, killing the cultures of S America + Africa (historians help me!) |                                                                 |                                                                                      |
| AD 2000+   | God is holy, so we are going to hell unless we believe in Jesus: (e.g. we say to <b>unbelievers</b> : "The wages of sin is death!")                                                                        | Most of Christendom                                             |                                                                                      |

|          |                                                                                                           |                             |                     |
|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| AD 2000+ | <i>New idea?! We are loved and accepted, but beware, sin separates (Do you get a feeling of déjà vu?)</i> | A small band of dissenters! | Most of Christendom |
|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|

(For me, the nadir of modern Christendom is the (second millennium) doctrine of **penal** substitution: God is holy, we are evil, we deserve to be **punished**, but Jesus is **punished** in our place, to satisfy the wrath of God – we happily sing “on the cross, when Jesus died, the wrath of God [the loving prodigal father?] was satisfied”.)

Paul Bev. 31.8.21

## 165 A game of three halves

I wonder if the following (grossly over-simplified, but based on my earlier writings) analysis of the development of the Christian religion might help us to understand it, see where it went so horribly wrong and appreciate what it might have to offer in the future?

The “first half” lasted 2000 years and took us from Abraham (~2000 BC) to Jesus, starting from when all people had the same very wrong idea of God as angry and needing to be propitiated. People gradually realised the loving nature of God, culminating in the teachings of Jesus.

Humans moved from a *retributive* idea of God to a God who is primarily interested in *restoration*: building good relationships between people.

The “second half” lasted roughly to the turn of the first millennium. The love of God spread like wildfire, and Christians (as they came to be called) were concerned with *restoration* of relationships and with combating evil – especially institutional evil.

In the “third half”, also of roughly 1000 years it all went horribly wrong – big time!

Christians thought it right to kill unbelievers, e.g. the Crusades.

Christians thought it right to torture and kill other Christians for their ‘wrong theology’, e.g. the Spanish Inquisition, and much more besides.

*Even in the modern era...*

(some) Christians justify racism and Apartheid on ‘biblical principles’.

(some) Christians hurl insults at other people in anti-abortion rallies and at gay-pride marches.

Christians split into a thousand churches saying, e.g. “We are a Bible-believing church!”

Why did this happen? What went wrong? That’s a very big question, but here are some ideas.

Old Testament writers thought that God was *retributive* and required propitiation, but God inspired those writers and cunningly hid the seeds of love and *restoration* within their writings.

In New Testament times those seeds exploded into new life as people realised that the God of love and *restoration* was now to be seen in human form in Jesus; he brought healing and hope, and taught that evil could be destroyed by loving your enemies – and he demonstrated it in his own death. Basic message: God loves and accepts us, so fight against sin in your own life.

That’s the really “good news”; that’s the “gospel” that I believe Jesus and his followers preached.

Then for hundreds of years, the church brought personal *restoration*, hope, healing and education in country after country.

But in the “third half” (second millennium), fear displaced trust, fear displaced love. Fear brought a more rigid and more literal interpretation of the Bible and, as a result, *restoration* was replaced once again by *retribution*. “God punishes sinners, but Jesus can save you!” became the main theme, and we became more concerned about fighting against sin in *other people’s* lives.

So is there any hope for a “fourth half”?

Could the third millennium be God’s fourth half? I believe it could, if we can get back to Jesus’ teaching and his example of selfless service, enemy love and of spiritually battling against evil in ourselves and against institutional evil.

Paul Bev. 4.9.21

## 166 Bible bashing – Old Testament

Can I ask you some questions about the Old Testament, please?

Sure, what do you want to know?

When was it written?

The latest book, Malachi, was written around 2400 BP (before present), then there was Moses writing at about 3500 BP, but back then the oral tradition was way stronger, so the Bible contains wisdom and knowledge from even longer ago than that – what a wonderful legacy it gives us!

It was written by different authors, right? All educated people? Did they know any science?

Moses had an education in Egypt, but many were quite humble – one was just a shepherd. But even in Egyptian times, their ‘science’ wasn’t like today. For example, they thought the sun went around the earth – we didn’t know different until less than 400 years ago.

So the Old Testament contains errors of science.

Well, yes, and it probably contains some errors of history and geography because the authors had very limited knowledge of such things. Mind you, as Jews, they had an intimate knowledge of their own history, but obviously not necessarily about others.

Doesn’t that worry you, that the Old Testament probably contains factual errors?

No, not at all. It’s not a textbook. Its purpose is to tell us about the relationship between Yahweh and the Jewish people – the people he chose to fulfil his plan of bringing blessing to all the people of the whole world.

Ah, right, so it tells us about what God is like and how he relates to us today. Great!

Not so fast! It’s not as simple as that. Remember that this was written long before Jesus’ time, so they wouldn’t have seen what God is *really* like. Back in Abraham’s time, about 4000 BP, everyone thought of God as angry and sending thunderbolts if you didn’t do what he said – it takes a very long time to change people’s views.

But I’ve heard you say that the whole Bible, including the Old Testament, is inspired by God, so surely God would have told them that he wasn’t nasty like that.

Well, I guess that God could have done a sort of mind-meld to give them a better picture of his loving nature, but what he did instead was to instruct them, in things like the ten commandments, to care for one another, and especially strangers and poor people – to get them to be more loving.

God really stressed the relationship side of things, even though everyone still thought of God as punishing people when they did things wrong.

Oh, and the other thing God did was to inspire the authors to say things – enigmatic things – about the future, “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel – God with us”. Eh?! What’s all *that* about?!

Then in Jesus’ day, when these prophecies were fulfilled, can you just imagine the “penny-drop” moments by the dozen, as people read their Old Testaments?!

Great, but can I just ask...?

Sorry, we’re already over our 500 words – ask me tomorrow! :-)

Paul Bev. 6.9.21

## **167 Bible bashing – Beware cherry-picking!**

Our supposed enquirer<sup>[166]</sup> was just about to challenge me about Old Testament violence, such as the sort of ‘Kill every man, woman and child in that land’ passage, and I was going to point her/him to Greg Boyd’s excellent book, *Cross vision*,<sup>[124–129]</sup> but I’d run out of time (words).

However, another (actual!) friend, ‘Arthur’, in response to my ‘Game of three halves’,<sup>[165]</sup> then raised the issue of ‘cherry-picking’ – prioritising some scriptures over others, and even totally ignoring any scriptures that contradicted our interpretation of the overall message of the Bible.

Anyway, to help me think about the ‘answer’ to OT violence, I started reading *Cross vision* again. Coincidentally, in the first chapter, Boyd refers to the danger of cherry-picking, and of producing “an acceptable Bible Lite”, saying it was “not a helpful strategy” – so he agrees with you, Arthur!

Boyd then quotes the passage saying that if my son “does not obey his father and mother”, then “all the men of the town shall stone him to death”.<sup>Deut 21:18-21</sup> Call me old-fashioned, but I’m not happy with that. In fact, I’m going to refuse to obey “the clear teaching of Scripture”!

But I have an idea: before I put that on my personal ‘Ignore’ list of Bible passages, I’m going ask Jesus what he thinks. I’m going to take the role of a disciples name of Fred – “Me and my wife live in a village just outside Jerusalem.”

Excuse me, Jesus, but I’m very unhappy with this passage in Deuteronomy. Is that really what God wants us to do?!

Come on, Fred, how long have you known me? Do you seriously think I’d want anyone to do that?!

But it’s what it says in our Scriptures, so we have to do what God says, right?

Well, yes, but that was written hundreds of years ago, when people saw God very differently. Remember that Abraham even thought that God might want him to offer Isaac as a child sacrifice – like the tribes around us did. At least God managed to move us on from child sacrifices to only offering animal sacrifices. (And soon, thankfully, we can stop doing that too – trust me!)

OK, I know that you've said that if we've seen you, we've seen our Father God. And you're just amazing, but...

Listen, just trust me for now – God's really not like that! In a few months, I'll be able to explain more clearly, once I've died and risen again.

“Died and risen”?! You've said that before, but I just don't get it!

Be patient; trust me.

True to his word, Jesus met me and the wife on the road home to Emmaus, and *didn't our hearts burn within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?* <sup>Luke 24:32</sup>

It was like the Scriptures contained all of Jesus' life and teachings, and yet it was written by people who thought we should kill our disobedient sons! Talk about **inspired!** <sup>2 Tim 3:16</sup>

Paul Bev. 9.9.21

## **168 Adam and Noah – Check your doctrine**

My (real) enquiring friend, 'John', came back to me and, while appreciating the idea of trying to interpret the Bible through Jesus' eyes, is still concerned that I'm ignoring the characters who come before Abraham.

As I've said before, I'm no historian, but to me, from chapter 12 onwards (the call of Abram), Genesis does have a more historical feel. I think therefore that we need to treat chapters 1–11 with greater care when trying to generate our doctrine from it.

I've already had a little look (after John's earlier prompting) at Noah, <sup>[150]</sup> but I stupidly missed out the rainbow and God's covenant. The writer saw it in terms of God destroying evil people, but God inspired that writer to see the rainbow as God saying “*Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.*” (9:13) So God is saying that he's not like the other gods. No, he promises, “*never again will I destroy all living creatures.*” (8:21)

And the Noahic covenant is not conditional, i.e. it's not saying, “If you obey me...” Rather, it's an expression of God's unconditional love and care for us. Specifically, “*As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.*” (8:22) (Sadly, humankind's treatment of the planet is working towards undoing God's attempts to preserve that “seedtime and harvest”.)

As regards Adam, again we need to be very careful if we try to use it to create doctrine. I have already referred to a book by “a highly respected Christian leader”. <sup>[154]</sup> He died some years ago, but people still gain real strength from his sermons. According to him, Genesis shows that women were created to be followers, not leaders, and that Adam's sin was to allow himself to be led by his wife, therefore women should not be allowed to be church leaders.

Sorry to be negative, but the other doctrine drawn from early Genesis, which I have totally rejected, is that of ‘original sin’. <sup>[163]</sup> No, sorry, God does **not** make rubbish! God looked at all he had made and it was good – it was “*very good*” (day 6)! Yes, OK, we do our best to spoil things, but God works for our restoration.

So, does your doctrine lead to fear and control (by clergy)? In which case, go back and check your doctrine against what Jesus said and did. Or does your doctrine lead to love and joy and self-control? In which case, you're probably on roughly the right lines.

*In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him [Jesus?]. **There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment.*** (1 John 4:17,18)



## ***169 Fact or fiction?***

Around 2000 years ago, there was a man called Jesus who lived in Nazareth, in Galilee. Ethnically, he was a Jew, a very religious nation who had their own Scriptures. His country and his people were among many who were ruled by the Romans. Jesus had been a carpenter but, having known the Jewish Scriptures since he was a boy, he started out as an itinerant preacher and teacher.

He amassed quite a following, and it is claimed that he did miracles including healing people. He associated with people on the fringes of society, and was very outspoken against the Jewish religious elite of his day.

This made him very unpopular with the Jewish leaders, who managed to persuade the Roman authorities that he was a dangerous troublemaker, and the Romans put him to death.

Within weeks, his followers, so far from being demoralised by the death of their leader, started claiming that Jesus had come back to life, and they then carried on Jesus' teaching and preaching about "the good news" (or "gospel"), saying things like, "The kingdom of God has come."

The Romans were unhappy with this talk of a "kingdom" and began to persecute this new group, brutally killing many of them.

The persecution meant that many of them fled, taking this "good news" to other areas of Palestine and eventually into other countries. Jesus had said that, as predicted in the Jewish Scriptures, he was "the Christ" (or "Messiah") so the groups became known as Christ-ians, and their faith spread rapidly around the known world.

The Christian faith gained some respectability when, in the year 312, the Emperor Constantine became a Christian, and over the next few hundred years the power and wealth of the Christian church grew.

Then, by the eighth century Christians were waging war against a newer religious grouping, Islam, founded in the seventh century.

In the 15th century the church began using torture and murder as a way of combatting heresy (the Spanish Inquisition), and then, in the 16th century, with the Reformation, the western church split into two main streams, Catholic and Protestant, and Christians began killing one another. The Catholic/Protestant divide had a major political element to it, which has meant that the killing has continued, sadly, even into the 21st century.

Meanwhile, since the 16th century, the Protestant church has split into more and more pieces, as Christians have argued about various different theological issues.

Not a pretty story!

Alongside the above, Christians have thankfully done some good things like caring for the poor, providing healthcare and education, and helping to establish workers' rights and abolish slavery.

If the above is roughly factually/historically true then it begs the question, "What went wrong?" and maybe also, "Might it be worth looking back at the teachings of Jesus?"

I'm wondering about the idea of getting together a few people who might call themselves atheists or agnostics, and perhaps read together a bit of Mark's Gospel (because it's the shortest), and see what we/they think.

Does that appeal to anyone?

## **170 Your image of God creates you**

In an on-line meditation, “A toxic view of God,” Richard Rohr starts, “Your image of God creates you. This is why it is so important that we see God as loving and benevolent and why **good theology is still important.**” (my bold)

Rohr explains that a view of God as a cruel tyrant creates fear, and fear is a great way to control people – which might explain some of the horrendous things I alluded to last time<sup>[169]</sup> – Christian wars and atrocities.

But actually, I think the problem we face is **more serious** than that – yes, *more* serious! The real problem is you and me. ‘They’ did some terrible things, and yes, when I want to tell people about Jesus, I have to first apologise for ‘them’, but what have *\*I\** done?

No, I don’t mean I have to confess that I used to nick things from shops when I was a kid. But how has my wrong image of God ruined my effectiveness as a Christian? And how could healing my view of God transform my effectiveness? How can **good theology** enable me to radiate the love of God? *That’s what I long for with all my heart!*

Believe me, I know, it’s very, very hard to shake off the theology we’ve been fed. This is what I’ve been working on these past four years – this is what God has been working on, in me.

Sure, we don’t think of God as a cruel tyrant, and yes, we do try to emphasise having a loving relationship with God through Jesus, but our **theology** is unarguably centered on punishment.

The gospel = We deserve punishment, **but** Jesus died for us.

Tell me I’m wrong! Tell me that this is **not** the basic message we’ve been fed all our Christian lives. And if so, please show me where, in the teaching of Jesus, you see a punishment theology.

And if it’s not in the teaching of Jesus, how dare we read back our own ideas of God into the Scriptures?! One of the most commonly used ‘evangelistic’ Bible verses is “the wages of sin is death,” which we read as saying, “We deserve punishment **but...**” Wrong, wrong, wrong! Bad exegesis, bad theology! That was **not** what Paul was saying. He was talking to fellow Christians:

We are loved and accepted by God, **therefore** don’t sin – it’s a deadly disease!

And actually that, in my view, is one way to sum up Jesus’ teaching – that’s the good news of the kingdom of God:

We’re accepted, we’re forgiven, **therefore** avoid sin like the plague.

Don’t worry, I still believe that the cross-and-resurrection is at the heart of that forgiveness, but forgiveness is a mystery, a beautiful diamond that can be gazed on from different directions.

As Rohr says, our theology forms who we are, which then forms our witness to the people around us, but we have to check our theology against the **person** of Jesus.

## 171 Punishment rules

I wonder how you reacted to my previous article,<sup>[170]</sup> in which I suggested that a view of God as a punishing God was bad theology?

Am I saying that sin doesn't matter? No, sin leads to death: "the wages of sin is death".<sup>[Rom 6:23]</sup>

Am I saying the cross doesn't matter? No, because it was there that evil was defeated once and for all.<sup>[Col 2:13-15]</sup>

Am I saying that, in the end, everyone will be saved? No, but I **am** saying – and will stand by it – that everyone, but **everyone** is loved and cherished and accepted by God, including X, where X is the worst tyrant you can think of. God "wants all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."<sup>[1 Tim 2:4]</sup>

Am I really saying everyone **is** accepted by God? Yes. The prodigal son never stopped being his father's son. As CS Lewis wrote, "the doors of hell are locked on the inside": people are only there because that's their choice.

That's a difficult one to swallow, I know. We think – not unreasonably – that people who are evil **should** be punished, especially X. And there's a helpful list of such people in Romans 1 – take your pick! Paul clearly says in that passage that they will be punished by God.

No, I don't believe he does. Paul says that God's "wrath was revealed against" them, and God "gave them over to..." As I see it, "God's wrath" is allowing people to experience the consequences of their own sinful (self-centred) choice.

If you think that Paul (or another writer) **does** teach somewhere (if not in Romans 1) that God **punishes** people for their sin, then go back to that passage and check if your interpretation tallies with Jesus' teaching. If it doesn't, then your view of God (or that of someone whose views you have been relying on all these years) is mistaken.

If you think (or someone whose views you rely on thinks) that God has retribution as part of his psyche then I would say that your image of God is mistaken because "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father,"<sup>[John 14:9]</sup> and there's no retribution in Jesus' teaching. None!

For hundreds of years, Christians have been fixated on retributive justice – "on the cross, when Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied," we sing. Someone has to die, someone has to be punished – but it's OK, we say, because Jesus took the punishment for our sins.

We think God is (at least partly) retributive, and we have been taught all our Christian lives to read that image of God back into Scripture.

Free grace, free forgiveness – especially of X – is just not right! But if we think that God can't forgive X, then our image of God's love is way too small!

But each individual is ultimately responsible for their own destiny; God's love allows us to choose death, but we are God's children unless and until we finally reject God's love.

Paul Bev. 17.9.21

## 172 Old Testament rules

Another good friend, 'Ian', has been challenging some of my statements. Great! Bring it on. I need to know, please, if – no, **when** – I get things wrong.

Towards the end of a long conversation, Ian asked, "So are you saying the Old Testament is wrong?" I, too glibly, replied "In some places, yes, I am." That was a step too far, so we've booked another coffee next week; here, as I've done so often these past few years, I'll think out my own view more carefully by writing it down.

In Jesus' day, "the Scriptures", as I understand it, meant more or less what we call the Old Testament, and, on the Emmaus road, "[Jesus] explained to them what was said in **all the Scriptures** concerning himself,"<sup>[Luke 24:27]</sup> (my bold), so I'd claim:

1) *The Old Testament is absolutely essential reading for Christians.*

But is it "the word of God"? Well, it's not **The** Word of God – that's Jesus, and he is, for me, the ultimate arbiter of what God is like – but I would still say:

2) *The Old Testament is the inspired word of God.*

Given the "difficult bits" in the OT, I think it's totally brilliant the way God seeded (inspired) into those writing all the predictions about "what was said ... concerning himself" – just wonderful!

So, despite those "difficult bits", my view is:

3) *The Old Testament is infallible.*

God planned it; God used (fallible) human authors to write it; and it will not fail (it is infallible) to communicate everything God needs us to know. (Remember, it's all the early church had, and God used it to enable the good news to explode around the known world.)

But I have to ask: is the OT – as some Christians claim – inerrant (contains no errors)? Or could it be that the authors sometimes expressed a mistaken idea of what God is like or of what God wanted them to do? When they wrote that God had told them to kill every man, woman and child, is that **actually** what God said? Ditto for the instruction that if your son is disobedient, the men of town should stone him to death?<sup>Deut 21:18-21</sup>

Personally, I cannot believe that Jesus would agree to his loving heavenly Father giving instructions like that. If you think differently, we'll have to agree to disagree, but for me:

4) *The Old Testament is totally inspired(!), but it is **not** inerrant.*

OK, so who is going to decide which bits you're going to 'cut out', Paul? Are you setting yourself up as arbiter of which bits of Scripture you accept and which not?!

I would simply say that we each have to decide how we interpret the Scriptures – we do that all the time – but my 'interpretive lens' is the character of Jesus. If something written in the OT is contrary to the character of Jesus, then I would say that the author was mistaken.

Thankfully, God often uses people who make mistakes (e.g. me!) to communicate God's love – and the Old Testament communicates God's love in spades!

Paul Bev. 19.9.21

## 173 “What is truth?”

It's John's turn to challenge me today, and I do appreciate having such wonderful friends who, I don't doubt, are praying for me, especially if you're concerned that I might be leading us all into error. Please don't stop challenging me!

John wonders how the Holy Spirit could inspire the OT writers to write something that was intrinsically not true. So my email one-liner (he's just off on holiday/retreat for a week) was to ask what **kind** of truth did he think God was wanting us to know, absorb, love, live out?

His answer was: “How can you have a ‘kind’ of truth?” Good question, and suddenly another article is initiated... Off the top of my head, could there be things like scientific truth, legal truth, logical truth, religious truth, relational truth, truth of character, personal truth? Indeed, could Truth be a person?!

My other thought was: can you have degrees of truth, or is everything either true or false? Can something be more/less true? e.g. “Is that a true likeness?” or “That's true to some extent.”

Christians can tend to be too dualistic – we think of things as simply true or false, right or wrong – and as a result we can sometimes tie ourselves in logical knots, e.g. are we predestined/chosen or do we have the freedom to choose? Maybe that's something for another day: can two logical opposites both be true?

I've been greatly helped by Derek Flood's *Healing the Gospel*; <sup>[50–54,57]</sup> he's a film-maker, and he made the point that we can come out from watching a good film, having been powerfully affected, changed even. How can that be true if it was a made-up story? Flood's claim is that God's concern is mainly to give us each a change of heart – well, probably a series of changes – so why shouldn't God use a “made-up story” to effect change?

Indeed, the section of Scripture that has most powerfully affected me this past few years is Jesus' parable of the prodigal father, a “made-up story” that has profoundly affected my view of God.

OK, I know that's a different issue from saying that some bits of the Old Testament are actually in error (I'll come back to this, don't worry), but it's important to acknowledge that there are different ways of conveying truth.

The words of the Bible (in the original languages, anyway) don't change, but our (translation and) interpretation most certainly does, e.g. most Christians (but not all!) now believe that the universe was **not** created about 6000 years ago, but is a lot older. Science has made us realise that we've been over-literal in our interpretation of the Genesis creation accounts. I don't have a problem with humankind's increasing knowledge (all of which ultimately comes from God) forcing me to rethink my interpretation of Scripture.

Finally, an important part of biblical interpretation is deciding what is the **purpose** of a given section of Scripture, so maybe you could think about: “What is the primary purpose of the Old Testament?”

Paul Bev. 20.9.21

## 174 Image is everything

As my image of God has begun to change, the parable of the prodigal father (as I now call it) has become **so** important to me, as has “*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*”<sup>1 Jn 4:18</sup>

In early days, I acknowledged the bad image of God created by the “nasty bits” in the Old Testament, but I now feel happy with where I am on that. And I’ve had to wrestle with “wrath”, because it occurs in the New Testament, as well as the Old, but I’m OK on that too: a loving human father would get angry if someone were harming one of his “little ones”.

Yesterday, I decided to tackle the references to “propitiation”, so I checked my NIV – but that word doesn’t appear! I had a feeling it did, so I went onto Bible Gateway, started typing and got to “propit”, and up came Romans 3:25:

*whom God set forth as a **propitiation** by His blood, through faith,*

But my NIV has:

*God presented him as a **sacrifice of atonement**, through faith in his blood.*

The Gateway page shows you the verse in multiple versions: in most it uses “atonement”, in a few it did have “propitiation”, but in a couple it had, for example,

*God publicly displayed him at his death as the **mercy seat** accessible through faith.*

Then I remembered something I had read in a book by NT Wright – several pages of it, but I didn’t really understand it! He talked about the significance of the more literal “mercy-seat”, and how some Bibles translate it as “atonement”, and others “propitiation”.

Clearly, I need to see if I can find where I read that, and **try** to understand it(!), but for now, just let’s think about the image that this verse paints, helped by the OED.

*Propitiation* – The action of propitiating or appeasing a god, spirit, or person.

*Propitiate* – Win or regain the favour of (a god, spirit, or person) by doing something that pleases them. (‘the pagans thought it was important to propitiate the gods with sacrifices’)

*Atonement* – The action of making amends for a wrong or injury.

The Greek words don’t change, so this looks to me like an example where the image of God you start with affects your translation. And then, of course, that translation helps to form the readers’ image of God.

I’m not saying this to criticise the translators. I believe it’s a principle of translation: If you’re not sure of the meaning of the passage, you use (your view of / your group’s view of) the whole tenor of Scripture to point you to a suitable translation.

Here’s my feeling about this:

God purely restorative => “atonement” (God draws us back through Jesus’ blood)

God partly restorative, partly retributive => “propitiation” (anger is appeased by Jesus’ blood)

Personally, I see no retribution in Jesus, so I favour the majority translation.

Paul Bev. 22.9.21

## 175 “This is probably my final article”

(Yes, I know, I’ve said that before! But I’d like to spend fewer hours writing for [myself and] fellow believers, and get on with sharing with the not-yet-believers around me about the glorious good news that I’ll try to sum up here.)

The Bible is the most amazing book: it’s totally and brilliantly inspired – and inspiring! Think about it – the Old Testament is the only “*Bible*” that the early church had and yet it inspired them to do some of the most wonderful and sacrificial things, in order to tell people about the “*Good News of Jesus*”, that God is in the business of restoring relationships, and this spread like wildfire around the then known world, and yet...

The Old Testament is about the “*People of God*”, a tribe that originated from a single family, headed by Abraham and Sarah, of whom God said, “they will surely become a great and powerful nation, and *through them all the nations of the earth will be blessed*”. That was the plan, anyway.

It took rather a long time. Why? Well, Abraham and many other key members of that family→ tribe→nation – including people like Moses and David – despite their doing some of the most wonderful and sacrificial things, got it wrong, big time, and did some terrible things, even as they were “trying to do the right thing”.

And here’s the amazing bit: God used those self-same flawed, fallen people to write the Old Testament which had, hidden within it, the “*Good News of Jesus*”. (“Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” <sup>Luke 24:32</sup>)

And what was the message? It was that through the death of the Messiah (Jesus) on the cross, the powers of evil – that had fed and nurtured all the terrible things we do – were defeated once and for all, so that we, the people of God, could be restored to one another and to God.

Exactly how did the cross bring the defeat of evil and restore humankind to full relationship with God? Well, that’s what Christians have been trying to fathom for centuries. The cross is a beautiful diamond with many aspects, which we can both glory in and apply to our everyday lives. But basically, on the cross, Jesus “died for our sins” (as the early church summed it up in the creeds) and brought new life through the resurrection.

Unfortunately, we, the people of God, have continued that long tradition: we have done some wonderful and sacrificial things to help humankind, but we have also made some horrendous blunders, despite always “trying to do the right thing”.

Right, let’s get out there, do some wonderful and sacrificial things to help humankind, and try to minimise the blunders by developing our relationship – both as individuals and as the family of God – with this glorious, wonderful, Bible-inspiring God.

Let’s do this! Let’s share the Good News of God’s unconditional love – and use words, if we have to.

Paul Bev. 26.9.21

*“Please can I stop now, Father?”*

## 176 Theology grounded in reality?

Sorry, I knew it wasn’t actually likely that I would stop writing, but I thought it was worth a try – the previous article did feel like a natural conclusion. However, my theology is currently being tested in a real-life situation, so does it actually work in practice?

Remember ‘Clara’, aged 78?<sup>[141]</sup> She was born into a dysfunctional family – and then things went downhill from there. She has suffered through unfaithfulness and illness, but at the time I got to know her, things were looking up: she had finally found a man who really loved her. But then in May, he died, and her children are not able to support her emotionally for various reasons, so in June I asked for your help.<sup>[141,142]</sup>

How could I communicate to her the love that God has for her? You gave me practical guidance, for which I'm grateful, but I also wanted a way of communicating, in words, the good news of Jesus' love for her, words that a desperately lonely, damaged, injured individual could relate to.

Based on the theology that I have been working on, here are the sort of words (to complement my actions) that I feel I might be able to use to express God's love in Jesus – I have already been able to use some of them:

You are loved and accepted unconditionally by God (and by me); God is crazy about you! God understands all you've been through, the way you have been hurt by others, and God feels your pain. God has entered into that pain – indeed, into the pain of the whole world – by coming to earth as an individual human, Jesus, and he's been through hell-on-earth too.

Jesus suffered bereavement of family (his human father) and close friends (John the Baptist and Lazarus); and he was deserted by his friends. He endured injustice, physical pain, total abandonment and a suffered lonely, public death, derided by the onlookers.

Within weeks, his followers were somehow totally transformed, and the message that Jesus came to bring – of God's unconditional love for us – spread at amazing speed throughout the known world, and his followers were willing to face torture and death for what they believed.

However, as we all well know, we too hurt one another in all sorts of ways, so what God wants us to know is that in Jesus' non-violent opposition to evil there is a way of combatting evil and of restoring those broken relationships.

The 'how' of that restoration is a mystery that Christians use different ways to 'explain', but what we have experienced in our own lives is that if we believe what Jesus said, take him at his word, trust him, and try to apply it in our lives, it really does work – relationships can be restored.

And that includes our relationship with the whole of creation (which we're currently making such a good job of destroying).

*Something like that, anyway. Amateurish fumbblings, and still a bit theoretical, but please work with me, correct me if I'm wrong – let's refine it.*

Paul Bev. 4.10.21

## **177 God's progressive revelation**

I went to a brilliant wedding last weekend – such a sense of God's love in the congregation and the couple alike, and I had lots of conversations with friends that I hadn't seen for ages. "How are you?" they said, so I told them! It was such a joy to talk about the Lord.

One thing I noticed myself doing (apart from talking too much, sorry!) was describing God's 'big picture' and gesticulating with two hands pulling an imagined group of people across in front of me, as God engages with humankind through the centuries, trying to draw us into a better and better understanding of the true nature of God, and what it means to live in love with God and with one another.

God used a series of fallible people, including Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets, and finally Jesus himself who, as a human, *could* have failed, but thankfully didn't. (I wonder how many times Jesus prayed, 'Thy will be done!')

So did God stop trying to teach us in AD 30, with the ascension? Or was God's revelatory job finished perhaps, in AD 90, when the final book of the New Testament was completed? Did humankind now know enough about God to see us through to the end of time? Does the Bible teach us everything that God wants us to know about how best to live in love?



Yes, and no! I believe that the Bible is infallible – it will not fail to communicate what God intends – but it was written by fallible humans and it has to be interpreted by fallible humans.

We interpret the Bible in terms of what we think God is like, and throughout history humans have had a limited and distorted view of God. God has tried to draw us towards a better understanding, but it takes time. Here are a few possible queries.

Why does the OT *not* clearly teach that men should only have one wife?

Why does the NT *not* clearly teach that slavery is a gross abuse of human rights and dignity?

Why does the NT *not* clearly teach that physically beating children is psychologically harmful?

My answer to these and other issues on the minds of Christians today, including human sexuality, is that God doesn't use mind-melding, so it's a long, slow process. As God allows us to increase our understanding of how humans 'work', at all sorts of levels, God can help us to learn new things, to our betterment, but **only** if we are willing to put aside the former prejudices that affect our understanding of Scripture.

The other problem is that, like the Jews of old, we learn and improve... and then slip back again.

One clear example to me is that Jesus radically challenged society's attitude to women, and the early church seems to have had women leaders, yet over the centuries male dominance returned, and is sadly still rife.<sup>[154]</sup>

Prejudice is a killer for human relationships, and for our relationship with God.

Paul Bev. 9.10.21

P.S. Someone has just told me that 'progressive revelation' is a 'thing' that theologians discuss. Here, it is just a phrase I thought of to express my feelings about God wanting to 'move us on'.

## ***178 Full Circle – now in sharper focus***

In early 2017, having moved house and church, I read a book that seemed to express exactly how I felt in my unhappiness with the faith I had followed for 50 years; and it echoed almost exactly what I thought that faith **ought** to be like. I was hooked and started exploring!

Then, in mid 2017, I wrote an article<sup>[0]</sup> because I had seen a **very distinct pattern in my life**:

1967 – Visiting a Christian conference centre, I found *loving community* and a *sense of mystery*.

1968 – As a student, I heard 'the gospel' (the 'mechanics' of salvation) and accepted it. I was well disciplined by the Cambridge CU – indeed, I've read my Bible and prayed almost every day since. It was drummed into me the importance of right theology, how CU students had preserved the purity of the gospel, against the onslaught of liberal theology. And we in turn fought against the charismatic movement – those gifts were *only* for the early church! I persuaded no-one.

1983 – I rediscovered *community* and *mystery*. In a wave of God's love, and the gifts of the Spirit, I had finally found 'the truth', and spent years trying to convince my more conservative friends. I persuaded a few.

1994 – I received a gift, 'tears for the lost', and realised how wrong I had been trying to persuade fellow Christians. Instead, mainly via the internet, I set about proving that Christians are right by using (a) the incontrovertible evidence for the resurrection and (b) the miracles I had experienced. I persuaded a few.

Undated – Around the mid noughties, as my church gradually became less miracle-aware, a small Bible study group, focused around 'Harry',<sup>[0]</sup> saw dramatic healing and prophetic gifts, and there was a real sense of *love* and *miracles*. But we were the only ones who were 'right'. I persuaded no-one – didn't even try.

Unbeknown to me, I was caught in a sect. Meantime, Sue was discovering a widening spirituality through a two-year diocesan course.

2010 – Almost overnight I realised what had happened, escaped from Harry and was totally bereft. Did God even exist? Was it all made-up, wishful thinking.

2011 – At a Cambridge CU reunion, I wept, but sadly no-one seemed able to help me. From there, I gradually rebuilt my faith, but along the old lines. I had never stopped attending my church and Sue, thankfully, never gave up on me.

2017 – We moved to a new church and I realised the **very distinct pattern in my life** – a battle between *being right* and accepting *community* and *mystery*. I now know for sure that I'm wrong about all sorts of things, but I know I'm part of a *loving community* and part of *God's mystery*.

What a total and utter joy I now feel! And I've seen more miracles than ever before: many people who are going through serious trials and suffering are being filled with love and joy, and they are unselfconsciously radiating that joy to those around them. Just brilliant! Luvvit!

Paul Bev. 12.10.21

## 179 Full Circle – but I'm still wrong

A few years ago, I managed to be so wrong that I ended up in a tiny sect who thought we were the only really 'right' people,<sup>10,178</sup> but God used that to show me the dangers of 'being right'. Then I (re)discovered the value of community – a loving group of people, all of whom are wrong to a greater or lesser degree, but are loved and accepted by God.

Community is great, and this has been a constant thread in my articles, but another thread has been how and why did the early church explode so dramatically? Would my new 'gospel of community' really change the world?! My niggle is that this 'community' idea is still too individualistic: 'me and my community'.

Let's look at the 'gospels' that I've espoused during my life. Would they cause a massive movement that could change the world?

In the 60s/70s, we were preaching about a holy God, individual sin, and individual salvation. But people outside the church were massively unmoved because they heard the message as: God punishes people for 'doing wrong', and Christians are the arbiters of right and wrong. We talked, for example, about people 'living in sin' – I can see why 'free love' was so attractive, with its sense of community.

In the 80s/90s, came the charismatic movement that extended the message of 'individual sin + Christian ethics' to include individual gifts. Remember the huge emphasis on the gift of tongues?! And then came 'power evangelism', where gifts of prophecy and healing were used to bring people to salvation. And then the 'prosperity gospel': if you really had faith, you would receive wealth (and health and fame?). True, God did repeatedly tell Israel that if they were obedient they would prosper – but that was as a nation, not as individuals.

Right, so would 'the gospel', preached as any of the above, turn the world upside down? It certainly attracted opposition, but that was because of our ethical stands against divorce, abortion, Sunday trading, and so on.

So I'm back to my niggle: I'm having a lovely time with my new-found faith, and am revelling in the love I enjoy in my church – and OK, I have noticed that quite a lot of people on the fringes feel very positively towards us, but would this **really** turn the world upside down?

Sorry if I'm sounding negative, but I really don't think that my faith (our faith?) as currently expressed is anything like as challenging (other than pointing ethical fingers) as the early church.

But I have detected a ray of hope as I fumble forwards in my journey. I'm reading Rohr's 'The Universal Christ'. OK, I don't understand a lot of it(!), and OK, it worries me that he's bordering on universalism, but there are threads that I want to pursue.

Did Jesus just come to bring a method of individual salvation or was it to bring something more... ..well, universal? The kingdom of God, maybe? What about Jesus as **Christ** – the universal king? So what **was** the message of the early church?

Thoughts, anyone?

Paul Bev. 16.10.21

## 180 Jesus on Genesis 3 – 'The Fall'

*I'm going to assume here that Jesus is planning a sermon on Genesis 3 for next week's service (in 2021). But just to be clear, what I write is, as ever, just my own ideas; I'm making Jesus the subject only to try to interpret the Old Testament through Jesus' eyes:*

Let's start with 'the story so far', but as you realise, Genesis isn't a scientific explanation of how We created everything; it had to be couched in terms that pre-scientific cultures could understand and remember, and so could pass on faithfully to future generations.

So the first chapter shows how We wanted a place where all of us – the Father, Me, the Spirit and you folks – could live together in harmony. We made the Universe as a sort of 'temple', then We came to dwell in it with you,<sup>[1:30-1:33]</sup> and it was good – **very good**, in fact.<sup>(1:31)</sup>

Chapter two shows how the whole of the creation can live in harmony, but in particular it focuses on how male and female can live together in a very special sort of intimate relationship.

Now, chapter three is what we might call 'The Big But' – '*it was very good, but...*'. Love and trust are only possible if you are able to choose **not** to trust, and even in heaven some of the choices went wrong,<sup>23</sup> and chapter three pictures how that then infected you folks.

So trust breaks down, and you end up making wrong choices and start blaming each other; you even try to say it's Our fault. How silly is that! Once that trust is broken, all relationships are tainted, and that includes your relationship with the rest of creation. You forfeited your position of free and intimate relationship with Us – Eden is no longer a place where you can feel at home.

As you well know, life is hard in many ways, and that's the result of those wrong choices – yours and the forces of evil.

'Don't panic,' says the author of Genesis: 'God has a plan – the Even Bigger But'!

In the short term, We provide you with clothing to cover your unnecessary sense of shame at nakedness. Because shame comes from a lack of trust, Our long-term plan is to provide you with a way to remove that shame and to restore trust. It will take time, so we drop into verse 15 the bit about the 'offspring' (that's Me) crushing the head of the 'serpent', defeating evil.<sup>(Heb 2:14, Rom 16:20)</sup>

We made you good (very good!) and We love you massively, but evil entered creation, and you freely and frequently make wrong choices. But by My death you stand forgiven; so choose life – life in all its fulness!

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<sup>23</sup> I really wasn't sure how to express the 'fall of Satan'.

*As you might expect, Jesus preaches about love and about **restorative** justice, but I searched for a sermon on the internet, and none of them sounded in the **least** like the voice of Jesus! It's almost as if they enjoy talking about sin, evil, judgement, hell, 'all your secrets are revealed'...*

Paul Bev. 20.10.21

## **181 Good news?**

The good news is that God loves us so much that he was willing to take the risk of coming to earth as a tiny, vulnerable human baby – a claim unlike any other world religion.

Jesus lived an ordinary life as a carpenter for 30 years before starting to travel around, preaching about what 'his Father' God is like; by his life and example, he demonstrated that love.

The common people, especially the social outcasts of the day, loved him and followed him around, hanging on his every word. As they trusted him, many of them found their lives changed: some received physical healing, and others received forgiveness for things they had done wrong.

Jesus taught them that God loved them, accepted them and wanted them to turn and face God, and rebuild their relationship with God.

But the ruling religious elite hated him because he called them out for what they really were, hypocrites, laying religious burdens on people that they themselves were not willing to shoulder. So they worked together with the political elite and had Jesus judicially tortured, publicly humiliated and murdered.

Some days later, word spread that Jesus had come back to life, and had been seen walking around the area, cooking food and eating with his friends.

Jesus' Jewish followers saw that, in their religious books (what we now call the Old Testament), there were dozens and dozens of things written that they began to realise were prophecies, which Jesus had fulfilled in his life, death and teachings.

This good news spread rapidly, throughout the known world, and many of the followers of 'The Way', as it was then called, were themselves tortured and killed. They still maintained that Jesus had indeed come back to life, and that, by allowing himself to be killed by the evil of humankind, Jesus had overcome, once and for all, the spiritual forces of wickedness at work in the world.

Followers of The Way continued to spread the good news (or 'gospel') that, as Jesus had said, God loves all people of all races and languages, and wants us all to come into a wonderful new spiritual community with God (the kingdom of God) and wants us to care for the creation.

Now, if we want our own way in any relationship – especially a relationship with God – it simply won't work! But if we're willing to trust God and do things God's way (God's pretty savvy about what works in life and what doesn't!), then we can live a life full of joy now, and then, when we die, come into an even more wonderful relationship with God.

Sadly, there will still be suffering in life, but God can enable us, despite the suffering, to maintain our love for him and for others – and even to love those who may abuse us. This is truly good news of a life worth living, in which we can love and serve God, and love and serve one another.

Paul Bev. 20.10.21

## **182 Good news, Mk II**

(Having read *The King Jesus Gospel* by Scott McKnight, and I've made some subtle but important changes to my previous attempt.<sup>[181]</sup>)

The good news is that God loves us so much that he was willing to take the risk of coming to earth as a tiny, vulnerable human baby – a claim unlike that of any other world religion.

Jesus lived an ordinary life as a carpenter for 30 years before starting to travel around, preaching about what 'his Father' God is like; and by his life and example he demonstrated that love.

The common people, especially the social outcasts of the day, loved him and followed him, hanging on his every word. As they trusted him, many of them found their lives changed: some received physical healing, and others received forgiveness for things they had done wrong.

Jesus taught them that God loved them, accepted them and wanted them to turn and face God, and rebuild their relationship with God.

But the ruling religious elite hated him because he called them out for what they really were: hypocrites, laying religious burdens on people that they themselves were not willing to shoulder. So they worked together with the political elite and had Jesus judicially tortured, publicly humiliated and murdered.

Some days later, word began to spread that Jesus had come back to life, and had been seen walking around the area, cooking food and eating with his friends.

Jesus' Jewish followers then realised that, in their religious books (what we now call the Old Testament), there were dozens and dozens of things written that they could see were prophesies that Jesus had fulfilled in his life, death and teachings.

This good news spread rapidly, and followers of 'The Way', as it was then called, proclaimed that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the King – not a popular idea among the Roman rulers! Many of the followers were tortured and killed, but they still maintained that Jesus had indeed come back to life, and that, by allowing himself to be killed by the evil of humankind, Jesus the Christ had overcome, once and for all, the spiritual forces of wickedness at work in the world.

Followers of The Way continued to spread the good news (or 'gospel') that, as Jesus had taught, God loves all people of all races and languages, and wants us to establish a wonderful new community (the kingdom of God), to care for all people and to challenge evil in all its forms.

The centre of any community has to be the idea that insisting on our own way simply won't work, but if we're willing to trust God and do things God's way, we can live a life full of joy. There will still be suffering in life, but God can enable us to maintain our love for him and for others – and even for our enemies, as Jesus did.

And the overall goal is that, as God promises, one day all wrongs will be righted, all suffering ended and there will be just one perfect, loving community, enjoying being with God for ever.

Paul Bev. 25.10.21

## **183 50 Shades of Black (wheat and weeds)**

Humans are very inventive, in that we can find a million and one ways to get things wrong – hence my title. Thankfully God wants to bring good, and so, over the centuries, God has inspired a number of movements to bring change for the good, but then, within each, there are seeds of evil sown – hence my subtitle.

Through my writing journey, I've challenged many things that I think might be wrong in the church's teaching and that might have contributed to the almost 50 years of wrong emphases on my part – and I'm sure there are ways in which I'm not right even now! However, I think I've picked up a number of strands by which each of us, in our own journeys, can get a little less wrong and, more importantly, can get a little closer to God.

My first target was penal substitution: I could see how unhelpful it was to many people, so I foolishly just rejected it. Eventually I realised that 'substitution' wasn't the problem – Christ really did die *for* us. It was the 'penal' bit that I decided was mistaken. God majors on *restorative* justice, not punitive or retributive justice. But through over-stressing one single issue, it has taken me a long time to spot other 'gotchas' that have hampered my Christian journey.

Below, I've given a whistle-stop tour of some of God's good movements, each of which sadly contained seeds of evil, which later blossomed and needed yet another move of God to help restore things – '50 shades of black' is not too much of an overstatement!

As I mentioned last time, when Jesus' Jewish followers came to the startling realisation that Jesus was God's wonderful fulfilment of the story of Israel, the people who journeyed with the Risen Jesus (and that journey continued after his ascension, too) were called 'The Way'.

That feels significant to me. Jesus said he was 'The way (and truth and life)', and the Christian life itself is definitely a journey – importantly, a journey based around a **person**. So the story of Jesus' life and the story of our lives form the continuation of the life story of the patriarchs.

As I've discovered, the Christian life is not about being right, not about finding 'the answer', but about travelling with a Person, moving through life with fellow travellers each of whom, like me, has got loads of things wrong. It's about learning from that Person, learning from each other, learning from the terrible mash-ups we have made over the centuries, supporting each other through the inevitable suffering and hard times, and rejoicing with each other in the good times.

What a joy it has become, for me, as I've discovered some of these things, and while I really thank God, of course, I also thank you folks too, who have been patient with me, as I've bumbled along seeking to get back on 'The Way'.

Thank you all from the bottom of my heart!

Paul Bev. 30.10.21

P.S. Because I hate being negative, I've highlighted some positives in the following.

*This is my attempt to set out some of the issues that I've picked up as being significant through the centuries of the church's history. I make no claims as to the correctness of the history or the Christian interpretation; it's a draft version, so please contribute more information and views).*

*It's here to show that there have been a lot of good movements, but that a lot of them went horribly wrong. (I use the shorthand of, say, C16 to mean 'in or around the 16th century'.)*

**Mid C3 Constantine gave Christians protection under Roman law.** Great to give Christians relief from persecution, but it opened the door to Christianity becoming a state religion, with all the power games that unleashed.

**Late C3 the church split into Eastern Orthodox and Western churches.** Pluses and minuses on the two sides. Interestingly, a small number of 'biblically active' Protestant leaders have recently gone over to the Eastern church, seeing some real positives there.

**Late C3 Augustine enunciated the idea of 'original sin'.** Not a biblical view, I would say,<sup>[163]</sup> and it gave clergy power over people at a time when infant mortality was high, plus it gave people a very negative view of their own value in God's sight.

**Synod of Whitby, 664, opted to follow the Roman church not the Celtic leaders.** Many Christians have recently found great value in going back to Celtic forms of life and worship: emphasis on community and a 'rule of life', rhythms of worship, and hearing God speak through nature and through silence.

**C12/13 Crusades** (I'm totally ignorant here) presumably started with good intent, to protect Christians in their pilgrimages, but in many ways they weren't a 'good thing' for promoting the love of Jesus.

**C15/16+? Spanish Inquisition** (I'm totally ignorant here) presumably started with good intent, to maintain the biblical faith of the Christian church, but in many ways it wasn't a 'good thing' for promoting the love of Jesus.

**C16/17 Reformation and the formation of Protestant churches.** A great many positives in rooting out some of the corruption of the church at the time, e.g. restoring the place of individual faith for salvation **by faith alone**, and cutting the ties of clergy being the only way to God, plus having the **Bible translated into the vernacular**, again releasing the grip of the clergy.

Negatively (and this side of the Reformation is still with us, hence I give it more stress), the idea of **penal** substitution was put forward. Substitution had been articulated by Anselm in C11, but the 'penal' idea was new, adding to the negativity of 'original sin'. For example, the 1662 Prayerbook (I recited it as a new Christian from age 20!), *'We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we from time to time most grievously have committed, by thought, word, and deed, against thy divine Majesty, provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us.'*

Further examples: Luther portrayed humans as 'a pile of manure', John Calvin enunciated the doctrine of 'total depravity' and Jonathan Edwards (see below) talked about 'sinners in the hands of an angry God'.

But this massive negativity continues, even today. From a 2020 book that a friend lent me, about the incredible love of God for us, titled: 'Gentle and Lowly – the Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers' by a young US pastor: *'It is probably impossible to conceive of the horror of hell and of the ferocity of retributive justice and righteous wrath that will sweep over those found on the last day to be out of Christ.'* (Can you imagine Jesus saying that? Not as I interpret the Bible!)

**Late C16 – C17** – With European colonialism came also the missionary movements that brought Christianity to Africa, India and South America, also bringing health and education, but creating a form of Christianity that negatively affected the indigenous cultures and, I guess, replicated the negative 'penal' Christian culture of C16/17, scaring people into faith.

**C18 Revivals of John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, et al.** Mass movement, bringing faith to vast numbers of people, but often based on this same negative view of God, misusing Scriptures such as ‘the wages of sin’ to scare people into confessing belief.

**C19 Revivals of Whitefield, DL Moody et al.** Mass movement, bringing faith to vast numbers of people, but with the same negativity.

**C18/19 Denominationalism** – Increasing fragmentation of the faith into a wide range of different Protestant denominations with increasing insistence on, ‘My church is right; yours is wrong.’

**C20 Revivals of Billy Graham, Bill Bright and (US-based) Youth for Christ.** Brought faith to many, but, influenced by the rapidly growing individualism of the age, ‘the gospel’ ceased to be the story of Jesus, as fulfilment of the Story of Israel and the universal authority of the Christ. Instead it became ‘The Four Spiritual Laws’ etc – personal salvation as a way to get to heaven, so that follow-up and discipleship became a real problem, and many fell away.

**Early C20 Rediscovery of charismatic gifts and formation of Pentecostal denominations** Great to have the revival and increased impact of the more dramatic gifts, but it formed yet more splits into yet more denominations, with a ‘my church (or my group within it) is right’ ethos.

**C20 Rise of the Evangelical right wing in the States, and growth of the ‘prosperity gospel’** I can’t think of anything positive to say about that.

**Early C21 What now?!** My feeling is that a growing number of people (certainly in my own range of contacts) are beginning to acknowledge some of the above negatives, especially (1) our growing individualism, (2) our focus on ‘getting to heaven’ and therefore being less concerned about things like injustice in the here and now (3) losing our grip on the idea of proclaiming the gospel as the whole story of Jesus, including his reign as the Christ now and in the future, (4) our continued insistence that our interpretation of Scripture is ‘the biblical view’, i.e. other churches/denominations are wrong.

God has never given up on us before, and I know he never will, but let’s be willing to admit that we, or our spiritual ancestors, got it wrong in various ways. Ships that are too tightly rigged – and are therefore inflexible – often founder on the rocks!

Paul Bev. 30.10.21

## ***184 Good news, Mk III***

The good news is that God loves us so much that he has been working throughout history to try to get humans to live together in love – with one another and with God – but it’s a slow process.

God’s main strategy was to start with one man, Abraham, 4000 years ago – “I want to bless the people of the whole world through you, and you will become a great nation.” Through the Jews, God built a set of Scriptures (Old Testament) that contained the seeds of the next part of the plan.

Sadly, through the centuries, the Jews did some terrible things to the peoples around them, and they did some terrible things to the Jews – par for the course in those days, I suppose. All the time, God was struggling to get us to live together in love.

Then 2000 years ago God came to earth as a tiny, vulnerable human baby, and this person grew up to be a very special person, who was to change the whole course of human history.



Jesus lived as an ordinary carpenter for 30 years then began to travel around, preaching about what ‘his Father’ God is like; and his life demonstrated that love. He taught that we each need to have a fundamental change of heart, deciding to do things God’s way.

The common people, especially the social outcasts of the day, loved him and hung on his every word. As they trusted him, many found their lives totally changed – some received physical healing, and others received forgiveness for things they had done wrong.

But the ruling religious elite hated him because he called them out for what many of them were: religious hypocrites. So they worked together with the political elite and had Jesus judicially tortured, publicly humiliated and murdered.

Some days later, word began to spread that Jesus had come back to life, and he had been seen walking around the area, cooking food and eating with his friends. Jesus’ Jewish followers then suddenly realised that their Scriptures contained dozens of prophecies that Jesus had fulfilled.

The good news spread rapidly, as his followers proclaimed that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the King – not a popular idea among the Roman rulers! Many were tortured and killed, but they still maintained that Jesus had indeed come back to life, and that, by allowing himself to be killed by the evil of humankind, Jesus the Christ had overcome, once and for all, the spiritual forces of wickedness at work in the world.

Jesus’ followers continued to spread the good news (or ‘gospel’) that, as Jesus had taught, God loves all people of all races and languages, and wants us to establish a wonderful new community (the kingdom of God), to care for all people and to challenge evil in all its forms.

Over the past 2000 years, God’s plan has had its ups and down – some very down, sadly – but God’s kingdom community has always insisted that what really ‘works’ is selfless service. Yes, there will still be suffering in life, but God can bring real wonderful transformation.

And the overall goal is that, as God promises, one day all wrongs will be righted, all suffering ended and there will be just one perfect, loving community, enjoying being with God for ever.

Paul Bev. 1.11.21

## ***185 Good news? Good news? Good news?***

Three times (1967, ~1987, 2017) I’ve had a real revelation of God’s love, and three times my life has changed for the better, but twice I’ve lost it again. *Doh!* But today that love is still strong!

In 2017, I wrote an article<sup>[0]</sup> because I realised that I’d spent 50 years ‘being right’, but that we should be living in love with God-who-is-community (Trinity) and with all people.

But I also faced the fact that the faith – even to me, let alone to outsiders – was more about sin and wrath and ‘being right’, rather than about love. Why? What went wrong?

The other day I reread my first main article,<sup>[1]</sup> and I was thrilled to see how far I had travelled. I was asking, in mid 2018, for your help for ‘Martha’, who had been encouraged by her church to ‘share the gospel’. She didn’t feel motivated to tell her friends and family that they were all sinners – the absolute entry point for ‘the gospel’, as she and we have always been taught it.

So am I now any less wrong than in 2018?! Here’s what I said then (italic added):<sup>[1]</sup>

First, what’s non-negotiable for me?

- 1) The central problem is human sin – broken relationships.
- 2) Our loving God has a plan to sort that problem.
- 3) The solution (salvation) centres on the *incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus*.

4) We need to respond in order to appropriate that salvation.

At that stage, I still saw 'the gospel' as centred around me-and-my-salvation (again, that's what we've always been taught, right?!), but encouragingly, there is the hint (*italic*) of a bigger picture!

Here's how I see my view of the gospel as having changed:

Pre 2017 – '**Jesus saves**'

Personal salvation  
based on: The Cross  
Resurrection = proof  
Response: Repent, believe, be saved

2018 – '**A bigger picture**'

Personal salvation  
Based on: incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus  
(Not quite sure where that leaves us)

2021 – '**Jesus Christ is Lord**'

The story of Israel, fulfilled in the story of Jesus<sup>[184]</sup>  
Brings *restoration* to the *whole world*  
Includes personal salvation  
Declaring that Jesus, the Christ, is Lord of the Universe

So, ignoring that fuzzy transitional stage, the paradigms are:

Pre 2017: **Problem** → solution

**Response:** Admit sin, **B**elieve in Jesus, **C**ommit to God (repent, believe, be baptised)

2021: **God's Plan:** Declare Christ as Lord

Everyone needs to live in love under Christ (God's kingdom)

**Response:** repent, believe, be baptised

All still a bit vague, I fear, but Scott McKnight's *King Jesus Gospel* is helping greatly.

You have to agree that it's a very different view of what 'the gospel' is. But maybe it's wrong? So perhaps we should look at how Jesus preached 'the good news' (people certainly received forgiveness), and check what the preachers in Acts said was 'the good news', and check 1 Cor 15, as a definition of 'the good news'.

Work with me here, please. Let's see if we can become less wrong.

Paul Bev. 6.11.21

## ***186 Wheat and weeds – learning from my/our mistakes***

I'm not sure who thought it up(!), but teaching people through parables was a genius idea: as long as the hearers are open to the Holy Spirit, then God can teach us the particular thing(s) that we need to learn at any given time.

But if, like me(!), you work out a given interpretation of a given Scripture, or a passage, or indeed the whole Bible, and try to stick to it, come hell or high water, you'll miss what God wants to do, in us and through us. I have certainly done that, over the years.

The other big mistake I made, which nearly cost me my marriage, was to think that unarguable spiritual gifts validate someone's teaching. As I witnessed many times, 'Harry'<sup>[0]</sup> had gifts of healing and prophecy, but little by little, his teaching changed, and I didn't notice. I did learn some good biblical lessons through Harry, but weed seeds were also sown in there.<sup>[Mt 13:24-30]</sup>

On a wider canvas, we can see that each generation has had to reinterpret (parts of) the Bible as God has taught us new things and moved us on in areas that needed reform. Think of the huge damage that has been done to the gospel cause, through an over-literal interpretation of Genesis, or by attempts to keep women out of church leadership, or trying to maintain slavery.

To combat some of the wrong-turns that the church has made, God has seeded movements for change, such as the Reformation, a **massive reinterpretation** of Scripture that restored the idea of 'justification my faith alone', and had the Scriptures translated into people's own languages.

Then there were the Revivalist movements, through which **huge numbers** came to a saving faith in Jesus, starting with Wesley and Edwards in the 18th century, right up to the early 20th century with people such as Billy Graham.

But the devil continued to sow his seeds, so amongst that glorious wheat, grew up some nasty weeds. I hate talking about negative things, as I feel so positive now about what God is doing, but I have detected a few pernicious weeds, as I've been writing – starting with my *bête noire*. I hope I'm not treading on too many toes here, but these are just my views, and I've been wrong before...

– An over-emphasis on penal substitution (just one of many biblical images for salvation), has been made worse by an over-literal interpretation of hell as permanent, constant torture.

– The gospel has been reduced to an individualistic, 'how I get saved and get to heaven', with Jesus becoming the mechanism by which I get saved, and, worse, salvation becoming the gateway to personal and private 'blessing'.

– Attempts to justify Old Testament claims that ‘God told them to...’, where what they did would, in other circumstances, have been classed as rank barbarism or even genocide.

How many people do you know who have ‘rejected God’, but actually, it’s the ‘God’ we’ve depicted that they’ve rejected?!

“But it’s what we’ve always been taught!” True, but maybe it’s time we reread our Bibles!

Paul Bev. 9.11.21

## ***187 The Story of King Jesus***

*With full credit to Ben Irwin (and Nick Lee, the illustrator), here’s my adultisation of the text...*

As the Bible teaches, God made the whole universe as an expression of his love, and it was good.

This was to be God’s home, somewhere to live and express that Love which is what God is.

God made the very first people, by putting the Holy Spirit within them, so they could share his home. God gave them a beautiful place to live in, and gave them a job to do: take care of his good world and help him rule over it.

Sadly, they didn’t listen to God; they didn’t like doing things God’s way. They wanted to do things their own way; they wanted to be in charge.

They tried to rule the world for themselves. And the result was that they just couldn’t face God – they became afraid of God and hid; they moved away from God’s place of beautiful togetherness.

After this, everyone tried to do things their own way, from the very first people all the way to you and me. God’s good world was fractured.

But God never stopped loving his people. God promised to make the world right and good again so that we could live with him, in love, and he could be our King.

God had a plan, and it started with Abraham – someone who was willing to trust that God really did have their best interests at heart. God gave Abraham a big family; indeed, his family grew to be a great nation called. God named them ‘Israel’.

God’s plan was to use Israel as his special people and, through them, to make the world right and good again.

It was a long, slow job, taking many generation, as Israel moved around looking for a place to live. God was with Israel everywhere they went. For example, they ended up as slaves in Egypt; God was with them, and when they were treated badly, God rescued them.

God gave Israel a home, and God gave them laws to follow so they would know how to show their love for him and for each other. God also gave them a very important job: to show the world what it means to be God’s people.

God told Israel, “If you let me be your King, your lives will be much better. I will live with you, and you can help me to make the world right and good again.”

But Israel didn’t listen.

God’s special people were just like the very first people. They didn’t want God telling them how to live. They wanted to do things their own way.

God's people didn't want God to be their King. God gave them 'judges' to help them work things out when they got cross with one another, but all the tribes around them had 'proper' kings, so they decided they wanted a 'proper' king.

God knew it wasn't a good idea, but went along with it. Israel had a succession of kings, some who paid attention to God's ideas of how to run things, but, as we all know, 'Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.'

Mostly, they ignored God's way and ruled Israel for themselves and not for God. They did things their own way.

So God sent prophets to remind the kings and their people to follow the one true King, to follow the one true God.

To try to wake them up and realise the folly of not letting God be their true King, God didn't protect them when they were attacked by other conquering tribes, and Israel was carried off – slaves yet again ... and again!

God kept speaking through the Prophets, and as he did so, God kept dropping hints of a Special King, who would come and rescue them one day, a special Messiah.

Because the people were totally ignoring God, for about four hundred years, God stopped speaking to them.

At the time when the Romans were oppressing them – the latest in a line of oppressors – one or two people began to wake up and were prepared to listen to God again, starting with a chap called John.

He reminded them that God had a plan: God was going to send Someone special. This Someone would rule the world as King, but this Person wouldn't rule like the kings of Israel; this Person would rule the way God wanted.

As John had suspected, God sent his only son, Jesus, his Chosen One, his Messiah, to rescue Israel and make the world right and good again – that was the next stage of God's plan.

As Jesus grew up, he did good things everywhere he went. He healed the sick. He fed the hungry. He rescued people from all sorts of problems. Especially, he told them God forgave them for ignoring him and going their own way.

Jesus was a superb witness to God's love because he did everything God wanted.

The religious leaders realised this was going to be a real threat to their authority. They knew how to run a proper religion, and they certainly didn't want Jesus to be saying he would be their King. **They** were in charge. (Well, the Romans were in charge really, but at least they could control people's religious lives.)

They could see that Jesus had a growing band of followers who were undermining their authority, and this could also bring the Romans down on their necks, so they needed to put a stop to Jesus.

They sided with the Romans and had arrested Jesus; he had a mock trial, was publically flogged and then he was nailed him to a wooden cross and watched him die.

Amazingly, in all this, Jesus never fought back. He never raised his sword. He never even raised a finger.

The powerful people thought they had got rid of him. What had become of this being "God's Chosen One". No way was Jesus going to be their King! He's dead and gone!

But there was something they didn't understand: Jesus didn't have to die.

Jesus chose to die for the powerful people, and for the very first people, and for all of us too. Jesus, the one True King, died for us! He died to make the world right and good again.

But no one understood.

God did something wonderful. They should have known that you can't keep a good man down!

The same God who made the world, rescued Israel, and sent Jesus – he did the most wonderful, surprising thing of all.

God raised Jesus from the dead.

But God didn't just rise from the dead; he defeated death so that death wouldn't have power over us any longer. Jesus made it possible for us to be God's people again. He made it possible for us to live the way God wants.

God gave us the King we needed. God gave us Jesus, a King who loves, forgives, and changes everyone who comes to him.

Our King gave us a job to do: love each other with every fibre of our being. That's how we show God's love to people around us.

Yes, we know that the world is still broken – very broken. We still take what isn't ours. We don't always love each other the way God wants us to. We don't care properly for God's world.

But someday, Jesus our King is coming back. He will make the world right and good again. He will make the world his home again, and it will be a place where we love each other the way God loves us.

God will live with us. We will help him rule the world, and he will be our king.

Forever.

Paul Bev. 10.11.21

## **187 The story of King Jesus = the gospel**

***Beware, man at work...** I'm wanting to do some more work on this, so please don't give it too much credence at the moment. I feel strongly that I need to add something about "As in Adam all die...", so watch out for a MK II version of this coming soon, I hope.*

God made the world as a place in which to dwell – a temple<sup>24</sup> – and God said, "Let us make humans in our own image"; God wanted to live with humans, in love. Adam and Eve were to be God's 'eikons', God's image-bearers, to look after the world on God's behalf.<sup>25</sup>

In order to care for the world properly, we (in Adam and Eve) had to trust that God knows best, but we didn't quite trust God, and we tried to run things our own way. That distrust led to fear and alienation, so we lost our intimate loving contact and wandered away – but God pursued us.

It started to go seriously wrong with Cain and Abel; nevertheless, God pledged to protect Cain, despite his having murdered Abel! (That doesn't sound fair, but love trumps 'fair'.)

Then God saw that Noah could be an eikon, because he trusted God. So when a massive flood was on the way, God said, "Trust me, Noah, you need to build a boat in your backyard!" He did.

But then lack of trust increased **again**.

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<sup>24</sup> *The Lost World of Genesis One, Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*, John Walton

<sup>25</sup> *The Story of King Jesus* (the gospel of 4–8-year-olds), Ben Irwin (page 1, but unnumbered)

God saw that Abraham could be an eikon, and said “I want you to go on a massive journey.” God wanted to bring blessing to the whole world through Abraham and his descendants, Israel. They were to be God’s eikons, to show people how to live in love with each other and with God.

Over the centuries, it didn’t go well because we didn’t quite trust God, and thought we had better ways to run things. But God kept sending eikons, such as Moses and the prophets, who were (not perfect but) willing to trust God and, as eikons, to reflect God’s love and God’s intentions for the good of the Israelites – and, through them, for the rest of the world.

It didn’t go well over the centuries, so for four hundred years God went silent – a pregnant pause.

Then the most remarkable thing happened! God loved us so much that they sent **the** Eikon. Jesus showed us how to live, and by his death he defeated evil and brought an end to death.

Some trusted him and saw wonderful things happening. Some who didn’t really trust God and who thought they knew better, killed him – but guess what happened three days later!

Where does that leave us? We have an Eikon to show us how to live, but we have to turn away from thinking we know best – repent and trust Him – then the most amazing thing will happen...

God, the Holy Spirit, will come to live within us, and “You will be my witnesses (eikons) in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

For now, the world is still broken, but one day the Eikon will return. God will be with us. We will help God to rule the world, and he will be our King.

Forever.<sup>26</sup>

Paul Bev. 13.11.21

## ***188 First-century explosion?***

Nothing concentrates my mind more about ‘What is the gospel?’ than a good healthy discussion with a pair of NYBs (not-yet-believers). Yesterday it was two good friends, from Anglican and Catholic backgrounds, respectively, but both adamantly not believers.

They know I’m a happy bunny in my faith these days, and wanted to know why. I told them how I’d totally lost my faith, tried to rebuild it on the old lines, but still not happy, then moved church. In explaining how a not-unintelligent chap like me ended up in a sect, I mentioned my friend’s healing and prophetic gifts, but the immediate reaction I got made it clear that ‘supernatural’ simply doesn’t happen. OK, so not an area of contact there, then.

Two areas I touched on did get a very positive reaction: my apology for the church’s appalling attitude to gay people, and (they are both into history) my question about what caused the original explosion of Christianity. OK, communication was better than it otherwise would have been (“What did the Romans do for us?!”), but that explosion was very remarkable; we left that historic fact hanging as we parted. I can imagine them back at home now, debating it!

OK, so come on, you historians. Can you tell me how I’m going to explain it? Yes, it was the Good News of Jesus that spread like wildfire, but what *is* that Good News? Let me offer you two back-of-a-fag-packet sketches (please forgive the caricature):

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* (final page, but unnumbered)

### **Good News A:**

God is holy, we're sinful, but because God loves us, he sent Jesus to die for our sins, to accept the punishment we deserve, so we can have new life now and go to heaven when we die. Life now is transformed by God's power at work in us.

### **Good News B:**

God created the world; God created humans; we tried to run it our way and it all went wrong. But God's love pursued us down the centuries, through the nation of Israel (who also got it wrong!). Then God came himself, to sort out the mess once and for all; we killed Jesus; he rose from the dead – so death is now not 'the end'. God's power is at work in us to transform people's lives.

Can you see the huge difference?

Good News A is mainly about me and my salvation, and once I've got it, I can then help to make the world a better place.

Good News B is much more about God and the amazing plan that started in Adam, was fulfilled in Christ, and is now about how we can enter into God's Story.

As important as personal salvation – through faith alone – undoubtedly is, if it's extracted **out** of The Great Story, it becomes: 'That's nice for you, dear, if you like that sort of thing.' It wouldn't have turned the world upside down in the first century, and it won't now. We sing the song, 'It's not about **me**, Jesus', but it is, I'm afraid – that's half the problem!

A realisation that God is in charge, God has a Great Plan, Jesus is the Centre of that Plan and Christ is the Lord of the Universe, really is Major Good News!

Paul Bev. 18.11.21

## ***189 Keep the gospel at the centre***

Today's title is inspired by those churches who perhaps say 'We're a gospel-centred church', but again I'm questioning what 'gospel' they mean... But first a couple of questions for you!

(1) Just in terms of the numbers of pages, what proportion of the New Testament was written by Paul? (It's not a trick – just Pauline as commonly accepted.) (2) What proportion of your church's preaching programme/home Bible studies is based on the Pauline books? Be honest.

Starting from ten years ago, when I questioned if God even existed, my view of 'What is the gospel?' was rebuilt on the traditional **Model 1** – penal substitution – but not happily so.

Five years ago I began to see more breadth, and moved to **Model 2** – a range of different ways of appreciating salvation: redemption, Christus Victor, etc. – and my longing to share the gospel found wings again, as I had different ways to help different people in different situations. Brilliant!

Of late, my view has broadened even more. I now believe that the gospel that turned the world upside down in the first century was **Model 3** – the story of Jesus as fulfilling the story of Israel.

As I've tried to express this in the past weeks I've experienced some kick-back, especially from people with responsibility under God: church leaders and Bible translators, and that's perfectly fine: am I getting wishy-washy, am I going soft on sin, am I just saying 'love is all you need'?

The thinking for this present article started when I bought Zondervan's '**The Story** – *Read the Bible as one seamless story from beginning to end*' – you can see why I was attracted to it. It includes a 'Cast list', and the entry



for Paul says, 'Paul wrote much of the NT.' I found that interesting, so I counted the number of pages from Romans to Philemon and was very surprised.

Having espoused Model 3 as being nearest to the NT model, I counted the pages occupied by the four gospel books (I see each of them as 'the gospel') plus Acts, which records the early gospel preaching, and the spread of the gospel. That's **60%** of the New Testament! Does this percentage reflect your church's teaching programme? (Paul wrote less than 25%.)

Why does 60% of the NT rely on story as a teaching medium? Story is **memorable** and story is **powerful**. I'm afraid that doctrine comes a poor second as a means of communicating truth. After all, it is a PERSON we're trying to communicate to people, not a religious belief system!

Our new church is brilliant, but I admit that I was disappointed, at first, to see that they stuck to the church lectionary – a bit of a straight-jacket, I thought. I think that no longer! If the gospel (as Paul insists in 1 Cor 15 and elsewhere) is 'according to the (OT) Scriptures', then to have three passages – OT, a gospel and an epistle – seems a great balance.

And next time you recite a creed, remember, it too is the story of Jesus – i.e. it's the gospel!

If our churches do overemphasise the Pauline books could it be from fear of 'getting it wrong'?

Paul Bev. 20.11.21

## ***190 The story of King Jesus – Mk II***

*(This is my second attempt <sup>[187]</sup> at telling the story of King Jesus, after feedback from friends.)*

God made the world as a place – a temple<sup>27</sup> – in which God's glory could dwell. And it was good. God then said, 'Let us make humans in our own image'; and God lived with humans, in love. And it was good. Adam and Eve were God's 'eikons', God's image-bearers, God's agents; they were tasked with looking after the world on God's behalf.<sup>28</sup> And it was very good.

Sadly, we (in Adam and Eve) doubted God, we didn't want to run things God's way, and it all went horribly wrong. Distrust led to fear and alienation, the relationship was ruined. By choosing to run things our way, death and suffering entered; we spoilt our intimate loving contact with God, and we couldn't stay within the original paradisaal existence – but God pursued us.

Death had entered, but soon we even intentionally caused death. Cain killed Abel, but even so, God pledged to protect Cain – God pursues us.

God saw that Noah could be an eikon, because he trusted God. So when a massive flood was on the way, God said, 'Trust me, Noah, you need to build a boat in your backyard!' He did.

But then our refusal to do things God's way increased *again*.

God saw that Abraham trusted him and could be his eikon, his agent for the next stage of the plan: 'I want you to go on a massive journey.' God wanted to bring blessing to the whole world through Abraham and his descendants, Israel. They were to be God's eikons, God's agents to show people how to live well with each other, with the world, and with God.

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<sup>27</sup> *The Lost World of Genesis One, Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*, John Walton

<sup>28</sup> *The Story of King Jesus* (the gospel of 4–8-year-olds), Ben Irwin (page 1, but unnumbered)

Over the centuries, it didn't go well because we didn't trust God, and wanted to run things our own way. But God kept sending eikons, such as Moses and the prophets, who were (not perfect but) willing to trust God and, as eikons, they tried to enact God's love and God's intentions for the good of the Israelites – and, through them, for the rest of the world.

It didn't go well over the centuries, so for four hundred years God went silent – a pregnant pause.

Then came the masterstroke of the Plan! Out of his great love, God sent **the** Eikon; God came in tangible human form, so people could see and feel and hear and know what God is **really** like.

Some people trusted him and saw wonderful things happening. But some, who didn't really trust God and who thought they knew better, killed Jesus.

The plan continued because, through his Jesus' death on the cross, God defeated sin and evil and brought an end to our ultimate enemy, death.

And guess what happened three days later! Christ is indeed King, so death could not hold him!

As in Adam all die, so in Jesus' death and resurrection, all shall be made alive. This is God's way: through suffering and death can come life; Jesus established for us the pattern of dying and rising, death and new life, being born anew.

Where does that leave us? First, we have an Eikon who showed us how to live and to love – not just an easy love but a love-your-enemies-and-pray-for-those-who-persecute-you love!

Second, and crucially, we all need to turn away from thinking we know best – repent and really trust God. When we do, the most amazing thing will happen... God, the Holy Spirit, comes to live within us, and 'You will be my witnesses (eikons) in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

For now, the world is still broken, but Christ is still King, and one day the Eikon will return. God will be with us. We will help God to care for the world, and Christ will be all in all.

Forever.<sup>29</sup>

Paul Bev. 21.11.21

## **191 New gospel, new evangelism**

OK, I know it's not a 'new' gospel in a sense, but it's new to me. Indeed, if theologians like NT Wright and Scot McKnight are to be believed<sup>[188-190]</sup> it's the old, original gospel, as preached by the early church. But it's new to me, and what a joy it is to have (re)found it after 50 years!

Now let me take you back to where my writing started,<sup>[1]</sup> with my friend 'Martha'. She was being urged by her church to 'share the gospel' with her friends and family, and didn't like the idea of telling them that they were sinners, facing the prospect of hell if they didn't believe in Jesus.

Does the 'new' gospel help? Yes, in spades!

Martha can continue to love and care for them – she's really good at that – and to pray for them. So then 'sharing the gospel', or 'evangelism' if you like, is sharing the person and story of Jesus, her friend whom she loves so much. What could be more natural?

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* (final page, but unnumbered)

To do this she needs to get deep into the Bible – the whole Bible, now we've realised the crucial importance of the OT – and to spend time with God, enjoying getting closer to her beloved Lord. And that joy she feels, in the Lord, will be seen in her face and in her life.

Anything else? Yes, I think she needs to **listen** – intently, every day and in every way. She needs to listen to God so that the Holy Spirit can prompt her as to the needs of the people she meets each day. And she needs to listen to *them*. What are *their* needs, *their* concerns? Where are *they* at in their lives. Then God will give Martha opportunities to 'share the gospel', i.e. share the story and the person of Jesus.

Can you see how totally different this is from 'sharing the gospel' according to the training that many of us had? Were you taught, 'How to turn the conversation round to the things of God'? Nooo! Listen to the Holy Spirit and listen to the person – just like Jesus did!

And please don't worry! (Martha definitely is a worrier.) God loves your loved ones **way** more than you do, and God 'does not want anyone to perish but all to come to repentance', <sup>[2 Pet 3:9]</sup> so ours is just to pray (as Jesus taught us): 'Thy will be done, thy kingdom come.'

**PS?** The Bible is God's love letter to the world, and we have this precious document (OT + NT) to share. But for perhaps 10 years, I have battled with the 'PS' of penal substitution, an idea added around the time of the Reformation. Maybe this PS is less than helpful?!

And I've now seen how another 'PS', personal salvation, has come to dominate and has become 'the gospel'. No! Personal salvation is an essential *element* of the gospel, but the gospel is about Jesus, not about me and my salvation.

As we know and love Jesus, we can share the whole love letter, the whole person, the whole story of Jesus. And we can tell that wonderful story in a million and one different ways. Let's do it!

Paul Bev. 25.11.21

## 192 Jesus – Fact or Friction

### *An irritating historical conundrum*

*(Here's the first draft of the introduction of a booklet that I'm planning to write for people who show some interest in the Christian faith.)*

Historical sources seem to indicate that Jesus was born into a Jewish peasant family from an obscure middle eastern village. As a baby, he was a refugee, as his parents fled persecution. On their return, he grew up in another small village, where he worked as a carpenter until he was about 30. Then, for three years, he became an itinerant preacher.

At first, people hung on his every word, but he was extremely critical of the Jewish religious leaders, who then managed to turn public opinion against him, and got the Romans on their side. He was arrested, tried and sentenced to death. He was publicly flogged and hung on a Roman cross to die.

His close friends hid behind locked doors, for fear they would be next. However, just a few weeks later they went public again, preaching to the people – as Jesus had – about 'good news', but this time making the claim that Jesus had 'come back from the dead'. They insisted that hundreds of them had seen him alive and that they were telling the truth, even when they themselves began to be persecuted, arrested, flogged and some even killed.

They continued to say, as Jesus had said, that they had 'good news' about a new 'kingdom' and about Jesus being a special 'king'. Despite the persecution, this 'good news' spread, their story soon coming to be believed even by non-Jews. It spread from country to country, and in a matter of a few decades there were people calling themselves followers of Jesus all around the known world.

Currently, there are about 2.5 billion people who say they follow Jesus and believe this ‘good news’. The best-selling book in the whole world is the life story of this one obscure Jewish peasant preacher, and it has been translated into more different languages than any other book, ever. The texts of the Bible – and related historical documents – have been studied by scholars, academics and physical archaeologists, and translations have been read and appreciated by billions of people for almost 2000 years.

If the above summary is even moderately accurate then the story of Jesus has had an unparalleled effect on the history of the whole human race – for good or ill.

But then again, maybe the whole story of Jesus is just made-up wishful thinking.

Maybe.

Paul Bev. 8.12.21

## ***193 Jesus – Fact or Friction (full draft)***

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Historical sources seem to indicate that Jesus was born into a Jewish peasant family from a small middle eastern village. As a baby he was a refugee, as his parents fled persecution. On their return, he grew up in another small village, where he worked as a carpenter until he was about 30. Then, for three years, he became an itinerant preacher.

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Currently, there are around 2.5 billion people who say they follow Jesus and believe this ‘good news’. The best-selling book in the whole world centres on the life story of this one obscure Jewish peasant preacher, and it has been translated into more different languages than any other book, ever.

The texts of the Bible, plus contemporary historical documents, have been scrutinised by countless scholars and academics for centuries – helped, more recently, by archaeologists – and translations of the story have been read, studied and appreciated by billions of people for almost 2000 years.

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*If the above summary is even moderately accurate then the story of Jesus has had an unparalleled effect on the history of the whole human race – for good or ill.*

*But then again, maybe the whole story of Jesus is just made-up wishful thinking.*

*Maybe.*

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## **Jesus – Fact or Friction**

### **An irritating historical conundrum**

So what qualifications do I have to write about the historical Jesus? None – unless you count a grade 9 at O level history in 1965 – but I have read quite a few related books in the past few years.

To explain, I have been highly motivated in my studies of the historical Jesus because, 10 years ago, after 40 years of calling myself a Christian, I lost my faith totally and began to wonder if maybe God didn't even exist and the whole of Christianity was just made-up wishful thinking.

I then slowly began to rebuild my faith, but it was on the same lines as the previous 40 years, and I still wasn't happy – it somehow didn't ring true to me.

Five years ago, having moved house, my wife and I went to a new church, and we were amazed by the sense of welcome and inclusiveness. At the same time, I started reading some more radical Christian books and, as I went back to looking at the historical Jesus, I was thrilled by what I found.

As I said at the start, clearly something quite remarkable happened in Palestine in the first century CE: the teaching of this one peasant preacher spread like wildfire, and people were willing to die for what they believed. How? Why? Whatever was it that so inspired them?

And the other thing that I find difficult understand is how, in later centuries, Christians could justify things like burning people to death, on the basis of their 'heresy', or repeatedly persecuting Jewish people; and why, in more recent centuries, churches split into more and smaller factions because of minor theological differences. How could all this be based on Jesus' teaching about love – including 'love thy enemy'?

Yes, many Christians have been sacrificially involved in projects such as bringing education and healthcare, the abolition of slavery and care for the poor, but that doesn't excuse the Christian 'bad stuff' that we've seen down the centuries. So what keeps going wrong?!

All I hope to do here is first to look at how good the documentary evidence is for what Jesus said and did, and for what actually happened in the first century. Then I'll try to offer a pointer towards how it could have gone so horribly wrong. I certainly don't have 'all the answers'.

But clearly **something** in Jesus' life and teaching has inspired vast numbers of people, for two millennia, to lead good and positive lives. He did talk a lot about love, and so I'd like to suggest that maybe it's worth going back and looking at the source of some of this good stuff.

### ***Did Jesus even exist?***

How reliable are the historical documents on which the Bible is based? We don't have the originals, of course, just copies of copies of copies – and 2000 years is a very long time. And hasn't the church changed the wording over the centuries?

Well, the church has changed the *translations* over the centuries – indeed, translations *have* to change because language changes over time, and the meaning of words changes, sometimes totally: "Wow, that's wicked!"

But how accurately do we know what the original authors actually wrote? What's the principle with ancient documents? I don't want to bore you with too much detail, but if we're to give any credence to Jesus' teaching, I think it's important to know how much of what we've got we can trust.

First of all, the New Testament isn't just a single book; it's a series of different documents, written by different people at different times over a period of about 60 years after the events they describe. The earliest of these were written as letters, so let's concentrate on one of those, just to illustrate the principle.

So Paul sat down and wrote a letter, in Greek, and sent it to a church in a region called Galatia (in modern day Turkey). As there were several congregations in the area, they would probably have written out one or more copies of that original letter, and people probably took it to other churches further afield, and then you end up with copies of copies and so on. The problem is that in the copying, some bits may have been changed, and maybe some bits were added and some left out.

Fast forward to today. As a basis for our (English) translations, we have what purport to be the words, in New Testament Greek, that Paul wrote to his friends, but how close are they to the original words? Well, scholars study all the different manuscript copies and, where there are differences, they give greater weight to the oldest existing actual manuscript copies. Also, this study has been helped more recently by other manuscripts and cultural information that archaeology has revealed (see Appendix 1). However, for any parts of that letter that still remain uncertain, there will be a footnote in the text to warn us.

But as readers of books such as *The Da Vinci Code* will be aware, the documents we have in our Bibles are not the only ones written around that time. We know that there were lots of accounts written because of what Luke says at the beginning of his gospel, written 35–50 years after the events they describe.

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*

This echoes the even earlier writings of Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, written within 25 years of Jesus' death.

*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures [i.e. the Old Testament], that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep [died].*

This could be set alongside the supposed claims of books such as *The Da Vinci Code*.

And one tiny detail that, for me, has the ring of truth: John, in his account (chapter 19), says that one of the soldiers pierced the side of Jesus' body on the cross and that 'blood and water' flowed out. The person who recorded that would presumably not have known, but modern medical knowledge suggests that this shows Jesus really was dead; he did not revive in the cool of the tomb and lead a religious movement based on claims of his own resurrection.

## ***How could it all go so wrong?***

Given that all Christians say they base their lives on the teachings of this peasant preacher, how could there be such a contrast between the best and the worst of the lives of Christians throughout history?

I'm no historian, but isn't it basically that people tend to see what we want to see, to believe what they want to believe? The Bible certainly provides a happy hunting ground for those who want to pick out bits they like and ignore those that we find unpalatable. Sadly, I can see how I've done this in my own life.

But if we do want a more objective view of Jesus' teachings, part of the difficulty is that, if we don't understand New Testament Greek, we have to rely on a **translation**. Plus, we also need some understanding of the 2000-year-

old culture; otherwise, even if we know what Jesus and his contemporaries actually *said*, we'll still have difficulty knowing what they actually *meant*.

The meaning of much of the text is reasonably obvious, but where there are bits that seem contradictory, we have to interpret it on the basis of the teaching of the Bible as a whole. Not wanting to overstate this, but isn't there a degree of circularity here? Our interpretation (and therefore our translation) is based on our overall beliefs, but our beliefs are based on our own interpretation of the Bible. OK, in extreme cases, the perpetrators have also had to actually *ignore* some bits of Jesus' teaching, but there is certainly plenty of scope here for getting it wrong.

What's the answer? How do we find a Bible translation that gives us a chance to examine the 'good stuff' of Jesus' teaching? One practical suggestion is to seek out (through books or in person) Christians whose quality of life we admire, and find out what Bible translations they use.

## ***Now what?***

In summary, here's what I've tried to suggest:

1. Based on the life and teaching of this one single Jewish preacher, something good and positive, attractive and contagious happened in the first century CE, and it changed human history.
2. We do know, with ninety-something percent accuracy, what was actually written down at the time by the authors of the New Testament, i.e. the claims they made about Jesus.
3. Trying to understand what Jesus' teaching actually meant at the time, and then how we might apply it today, has its pitfalls. Sadly, it has on occasion gone horribly wrong.

The shortest contemporaneous summary of the life and teachings of Jesus is: *The Good News According to Mark* (a.k.a. Mark's Gospel). In a modern English translation it's only about 14,000 words, which could probably be read in an evening (this booklet is about 2000 words). Luke, quoted above, set out his "orderly account", but his version is quite long (24,000 words).

Thanks for listening, and if you do read one of the gospels, I'd love to hear what you think.

Paul Beverley, 2nd Jan 2022  
paul@archivepub.co.uk

## ***Appendix 1***

How many old manuscripts have we got, and how close are they, time-wise, to the date when the originals were written?

Scholars think that the various New Testament books were written between AD 40 and AD 100. We have manuscript copies of some parts of those books dated (some by *radiocarbon analysis*) to around AD 130, and full manuscripts from AD 350. So those manuscripts are from 30–310 years after the books were written, and there are over five thousand (part or whole) Greek manuscripts.

How does that compare with other contemporary historical documents?

|                             | <b><i>Written</i></b> | <b><i>Earliest mss</i></b> | <b><i>Time gap (yr)</i></b> | <b><i>Copies</i></b> |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| Livy's <i>Roman History</i> | 59 BC – AD 17         | AD 900                     | <b>900</b>                  | <b>20</b>            |
| Tacitus                     | AD 100                | AD 1100                    | <b>1000</b>                 | <b>20</b>            |
| Herodotus                   | 488–428 BC            | AD 900                     | <b>1300</b>                 | <b>8</b>             |
| Caesar's <i>Gallic Wars</i> | 58–50 BC              | AD 900                     | <b>950</b>                  | <b>10</b>            |
| New Testament               | AD 40–100             | AD 130 (part)              | <b>&lt; 310</b>             | <b>&gt; 5000</b>     |

## 194 Why Fact or Friction?

A couple of readers have already given me some helpful comments – many thanks! Some were about the detail, and I've made tweaks as a result (I've edited the article,<sup>[193]</sup> rather than creating a new article). But there were also questions as to what I was trying to achieve.

If I've learnt anything about myself through my recent journeyings it's that I tend to think I've found "the answer" and then to try to persuade others. In a sense, that's what I'm doing now!! But something has happened to me, and it does feel good and positive, and I do want to share it. Is that so wrong?

Well, I don't think it's wrong, but there is such a thing as over-selling, and sadly I've even done that in my professional life.

I write computer programs, for use by proofreaders and editors, and because they save so much time and make the job more enjoyable, some colleagues have even said that they are "life-changing". I started writing these programs 16 years ago, and in the early days, I tended to over-sell them ("sell", but they are free). Sadly, by my well-intentioned evangelism, I have built up a level of resistance and negativity that I'm still having to fight against. Does this ring any bells?!

Even if we put aside the pulpit-thumping "The wages of sin is death!" approach, if you look at any Christian book(let) that is aimed at not-yet-believers, isn't it always about persuading and proving that we've got the right answers? Is that necessarily the best way?

Speaking personally, I know how I react when I'm faced with a pushy salesman. I only listen in order to pick holes in their arguments. A good salesman must first be a **listener**.

Anyway, did the good news of Jesus spread like wildfire in the first century because the disciples were good at persuasion? Did they have a well-thought-out evangelistic strategy?

My studies have suggested that they shared their love for Jesus by their lives, and they witnessed by telling the story of Jesus, of what happened, and of what Jesus taught. They then called people to reorient their lives (repent), to be baptised (as a symbol of that reorientation), and to focus their lives on loving and serving the people around them – that's contagious!

I certainly do not think that they tried to persuade people to believe in a mechanism for personal salvation, saying that this is how you get to heaven.

In the hope that it will help *some people*, I've tried to set out the story of what happened in the first century, suggesting that it is at least historically valid. Then I've contrasted the positive contribution of the Christian community with some of the terrible negatives. These things actually happened. Interesting, isn't it?

OK, this is not a panacea, but if it prompts one person to sit down and read the story of Jesus (the good news, the gospel), then it was worth the effort.



## 195 Back to first principles – evangelism

Mr Google seems to suggest that less than 5% in the UK attend church regularly. Now, if you're reading this article, you probably believe that knowing Jesus is a life-changing experience. So how could we possibly reach the 95%?!

How many Jews were there in first century Palestine? And a small subset of them had an idea: *Jesus Christ is Lord!* In under 100 years that idea had spread throughout the known world.

So can the New Testament tell us how to reach the 95%? (A friend recommended Green's 1979 classic, *Evangelism then and now*, but I can't get it.)

I've recently been asked to join *A passion for life*. The website says: '*A month of mission, A lifetime of evangelism, A passion for life*'. Over 750 churches are '*connected and are praying, learning and stepping out together to make Jesus known in our communities. Will you join us?*' Could training for (lifelong) evangelism, and having missions, help us to reach the 95%?

As a back-to-first-principles guy, I'm wondering what this 'evangelism' thing is. Is that what bore such fruit in the first century? As you may know, the word 'evangelism' doesn't appear in the Bible. 'Evangelist' does, three times, but that word doesn't have good connotations these days. OED says it's: *A person who seeks to convert others to the Christian faith, especially by public preaching.*

So what have we got? Acts 21 just refers to 'Philip the evangelist', Eph 4 lists the gifts with, 'some to be evangelists' and in 2 Tim 2, Paul urges Timothy to 'do the work of an evangelist'.

Pending Michael Green's view (or any other book suggestions, please?), and thinking in terms of words (as I do!), to know what an NT **evangelist** did, we need to know what the 'evangel' is, the gospel, the good news. And on that, my view has changed.

I guess most Christians think of 'the gospel' as the means by which Jesus' death and resurrection gains my personal salvation, but I think that is far too narrow a definition. It's part of it, yes, an essential part of it (and I hope the following illustration won't offend) but...

To say that to 'preach the gospel of the kingdom' is to explain the means of personal salvation – as modern evangelism does – is like trying to tell people the whole relationship of marriage by explaining about the central physical act. We need to teach and model the relationship, not just keep telling them about the means of salvation.

I have come to believe that 'preaching the gospel' is about narrating the whole story of King Jesus, which is not something you can do in a two-hour gospel meeting. Maybe the NT evangelist was someone who (before the gospel was written down) was particularly gifted at telling the story, and not someone who was good at coaxing people into 'making a decision for Jesus'?

Please tell me what you think. (Could anyone lend me Green's book, perhaps?)

Paul Bev. 21.1.22

## 196 Evangelism: decision–discipleship

*I'm a little more negative today than I like, but only to point up what I see as a major problem, and only because I think there's a better way; I've seen it in action in my own church, where new people are coming to faith.*

I still want to reach the 95%, and after thinking about 'A passion for life',<sup>[195]</sup> I've formed a picture of two models of 'church' – probably too simplistic, but worth a look?

The model I've been grown up with is what I'd call a decision–discipleship model (DD). We pray for our unsaved friends and family (F&F). We try to get them to 'hear the gospel', once mainly through 'missions' (Billy Graham etc.) but now more friendship-based and course-based, through the massive success of Alpha.

Once someone has made a *decision* they become part of the church, and we have to *disciple* them – and all church leaders know how difficult that is! They have to read the Bible and pray (daily?), come to church regularly, give sacrificially and, if the church is to grow, they need to tell their F&F about Jesus, and get them to come to church or to a mission. (Can you feel the guilt rising?)

For those who take their discipleship seriously, there's not a lot of time for anything other than church, so our F&F circle shrinks to mainly church friends plus unsaved family. Then comes mission time, and guilt drives us to try to find people to pray for, befriend and invite.

That's my experience, but maybe yours is different. Chiefly guilt-driven?

This DD model is centered on DECISION: 'Have you given your life to the Lord?' Only once they are 'in' can they grow in their relationship with the Lord.

What if we turned it round to where the whole thing is centered on Jesus Christ as Lord, with people getting to know Jesus and *growing* into a loving relationship with the Lord? We might call it **following–growing** (FG).

In this model, 'preaching the gospel' is telling the full story of Jesus, introducing our F&F to a person whom we love, to what he did, what he said. And as they catch a sense of our love for them and for Jesus, they can join us on the journey *on their own terms*, but be gradually drawn into that relationship. We're all on a journey, we're all followers of Jesus, all on 'the way'.

This all sounds a bit wishy-washy! Am I going 'soft on sin'? No, but in the DD model, a person isn't allowed to start their relationship with God unless and until they admit they're a sinner!

If we turn it round and focus on God's love for us, focus on who Jesus is and what he did, and what *we did to him*, and how God showed that Jesus is Lord. Don't you think that, if we pray, the Holy Spirit might grow a realisation in the heart of our friend or family member that they don't exactly match up to Jesus' standard?

Paul Bev. 26.1.22

## 197 *Evangelism as relationship?*

I still want to reach the 95%, and I'm still on about the difference between the first-century church and now. I mentioned this to one of the prime movers of 'A passion for life'<sup>[195,196]</sup> and he recommended Michael Green's 1979 book *Evangelism then and now*.

Last time, I looked at the decision–discipleship model of church,<sup>[196]</sup> and Green's book confirms that this *is* the model on which we operate, and he was both a highly respected academic theologian and a committed personal evangelist, so evangelism was indeed his 'passion for life'. Here's how I read his analysis:

In the preface, he states as a given that 'the New Testament church existed for the twin purposes of dynamic worship and bold and imaginative evangelism.' I'd like to discuss that, but more importantly, I do agree with him that it isn't true of today's (UK?) church.

Why not? He lists five problems:

- We have an emaciated abbreviation of the New Testament good news.
- Our methods of evangelism are stereotyped.
- Our after-care is negligible (I assume he means discipleship).
- The whole thing is human-centred.

– The greatest obstacle of all is apathy.

So ‘how did they succeed?’ he asks (as do I!), and he says: ‘The main secret of their impact was the outstanding change in their own lives.’ I can accept that.

Later he says that the NT church has ‘a tremendous concern for the lost’ and so they ‘seek to persuade, to warn, to teach, to cajole others into that relationship with the risen Christ which has become the mainspring of their own lives.’ Hmm, interesting!

The rest of the book deals with how we must (1) change our church life, (2) improve our discipleship programmes, (3) improve our evangelism, and (4) involve the Holy Spirit.

Now, look back over that brief summary, especially in the light of what I’ve been exploring, of how we’ve reduced the gospel to a human-centred ‘how I receive my salvation’. But that’s what Green believed it was, and for a few hundred years, it’s what we’ve all been taught the gospel is.

I have argued in my articles that it is *part* of the gospel, an important part, yes, but I think it’s ‘an emaciated abbreviation of the NT good news’. Sorry, I’m cheating because that’s not what Green meant: he was referring to the gospel having no real power.

And as for the greatest obstacle being apathy, how is that even possible?! Do we really believe that Christ rules the universe? that God lives in our hearts through his Spirit? that God has a plan to redeem this world we live in? If so, how could anyone possibly be apathetic about that?!

But if you think your responsibility is ‘to persuade, to warn, to teach, to cajole others into that relationship’, I’ll forgive you for feeling apathetic – can you cajole someone into a relationship?! Sorry, yes, I’m being negative, but I believe there’s a better way. Let’s keep talking together.

Paul Bev. 30.1.22

## ***198 A vision for world evangelism?***

Since I wrote my last article, I’ve begun to doubt. What am I doing? Am I wasting my time? What am I, what are we, doing to reach the 95% of people around us who don’t go to church?

But then I was encouraged by reading that, writing in OUP’s *World Christian Encyclopedia*, David Barrett estimates that, from a motley crew of eleven disciples, there were about one million Christians by AD100 and 44 million by AD500. How did God do that?!

I *think* God achieved it by coordinating groups of fearless individuals inspired by the realisation that Jesus, who died and was raised to life again, was King of the Universe, and that the love they saw in Jesus casts out all fear. They were a *network* (a.k.a. fishers of men) of love, loving communities, ambassadors for the King, lights to the world, the aroma of Christ, seeing the power of the Holy Spirit transforming relationships, enabling them to face suffering, even persecution.

Again how is God wanting *me* (us?) to reach the 95% now, in 2022?

Then I was affected by a secular BBC presenter, Ade Adepitan, back in his home city of Lagos, encountering the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), with a building holding 200,000 for their monthly Holy Ghost Services now building another to hold one million people. They said their vision was to plant an RCCG church within “five minutes’ walk of everyone” (was that in Africa?) or “within five minutes’ drive of everyone” (was it?) in Europe/USA.

Where does that leave my vision of living a life of love through a tiny medieval Anglican church in Norwich, trying to show love to everyone I meet day by day. A bit pathetic, eh?

No, I reject those negative thoughts of guilt; and I reject any thoughts of fear about my loved one going to hell unless “knowing the fear of the Lord [I] persuade [them]”.

[If anyone uses that verse<sup>2 Cor 5:11</sup> to tell you to (try to) persuade people into a relationship with God, check out the context (the passage behind much of my paragraph 3 above); I believe Paul was talking about persuading fellow believers to take their relationship with God seriously.]

I **do** believe that I’m at least vaguely on the right lines in saying that it was a huge mistake to shrink the gospel to ‘me and my salvation’, as Evangelicals have done for the past few hundred years, and I do believe that telling people the story of Jesus (= the gospel) is not half as scary as Green’s<sup>[197]</sup> ‘to persuade, to warn, to teach, to cajole others into that relationship’.

God loves people so much, and he wants ‘everyone to come to repentance’; he will use the RCCG, but maybe God is also willing to use li’l old me and li’l old you and God could coordinate us, along with others around the world for the likes of: 11 => a million => 44 million.

Paul Bev. 13.2.22

## 199 “And ye shall be my ...” – Ye shall be my what?

Yes, God wants all people to come to repentance. Yes, God is so desperate that everyone should know his love that he will use *anyone* willing to help in achieving that aim. But don’t you think we owe it to God to follow what it says in the ‘BIBLE’, that’s Jesus’ **Best Instructions Before Leaving Earth**. (Sorry, blame Tony Maidment, Church Army evangelist, for that one.)

So what were Jesus’ final instructions before he ascended? “And ye shall be my *evangelists*”? No, and we’re not all called to be evangelists. “He called ... **some** to be ... evangelists” – and I’ve already questioned what an ‘evangelist’ was in the early church.<sup>[195]</sup>

OK, but surely we should all have a lifelong commitment to evangelism? How else are we going to reach the 95%?! Yes, but again what is ‘evangelism’? Words are important, but slippery; their meanings change with time. I quoted<sup>[195]</sup> the OED definition: *A person who seeks to convert others to the Christian faith, especially by public preaching*. So what about evangelism? OED again: *The spreading of the Christian gospel by public preaching or personal witness*.

If your church is urging a commitment to evangelism then you’ll be encouraged to go on an evangelism course. Maybe it’s different now, but any course I’ve ever been on has been:

1) How to get opportunities to ‘share the gospel’ and 2) how to share the gospel. In other words, personal witness is persuading people to accept Jesus’ offer of personal salvation. (And then the church tries to disciple them on ‘follow-up’ courses, i.e. the decision–discipleship model.<sup>[196]</sup>)

So is that how eleven disciples became one million followers of “The Way” in just a few decades (AD100) and 44 million by AD500?<sup>[198]</sup> Did they do it, as Michael Green claims in “Evangelism then and now”, by trying to “persuade, to warn, to teach, to cajole others into that relationship”?

No! The good news spread because (a) it really is the **best life-changing good news ever**, and (b) they **made disciples**, followers, and they **baptised** them. Like what Jesus told them (us) to do!

So let’s get away from what we’ve always been taught – do evangelism, get converts, then disciple them – and let’s look at the biblical pattern:

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be My **witnesses** in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

(I once read that the word ‘witness’ is linked to the word ‘martyr’!)

Therefore go and make **disciples** of all nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.

Yes, but what does that mean in practice? Dunno, but here's a thought: can someone follow Jesus (be a disciple) *before* they have 'made a decision'. Can you love someone *before* you say, "I do"?

Discuss.

Paul Bev. 19.2.22

## **200 "O Love that will not let me go"**

As I reach my bicentenary(!), this is going to be a positive article, but I do have to start negative, sorry. I can't shake off what I read in a book written by an extremely eminent theologian, the architect of the Decade of Evangelism. He said that the early church succeeded by trying to "persuade, to warn, to teach, to cajole others into that relationship [with God]" and the church today is shrinking because of "the greatest obstacle of all, our apathy."<sup>[197]</sup>

Let's just suppose for a minute that the Christian faith really is about a loving relationship with God. What would that mean? What is a relationship? Well, it's when two persons get to know one another, and each begins to feel that the other is really rather special.

There are various levels of relationship, but there is one where the two persons love one another so much that they make solemn vows to be committed to one another for life!

Suppose our relationship could be a bit like being married to God? A revolutionary new idea? No, Jesus' final words to his disciples<sup>[Jn 17-21]</sup> are all about this loving relationship.

How would it work in practice? Us and God, I mean. Well, on God's side, he already knows that we are very special – the Bible says it over and over and over again – God is crazy about us!

For our side? As with any relationship, it takes time. We need to get to know the person. Trouble is, God has such a bad press. What about relating to Jesus instead? Jesus is much more approachable (well, not all his parables are that cosy!), but the Father is OK with us finding Jesus easier. He knows that gods in general have always had a bad reputation, which is why the "coming to earth" thing was such a stroke of genius.

And that's why people flocked around Jesus – they simply loved him!

Some of you may remember a curate at Holy Trinity, Norwich, in the 1990s, and the "What's happened to John?!" thing. Suddenly, his sermons took off; he was so enthusiastic. And in prayer meetings the first prayer was never, "Dear Lord please..." because John would lead off with an excited conversation with God about how great it was to know him, etc. No apathy there!

At the time, we diagnosed it as that John, a strongly conservative Evangelical, had come into a charismatic renewal, but I think he had fallen in love with God. I pray that John still has that love.

The same happened to me when I came to faith in the late '60s – I discovered real love for the first time, coming from a totally dysfunctional family...but I lost it again...and rediscovered it in the '80s...and lost it again...and found it again five years ago. I WILL NOT LET IT GO!

Apathy is ousted by: "O Love that will not let me go"!

Paul Bev. 20.2.22

## 201 *Totally unreasonable love*

I don't think anyone would argue with the idea that – at least in theory – the Christian faith is about living in a loving relationship with God.<sup>[200]</sup> But how, in practice, does that affect our relationship with other people?

Totally!

First off, isn't it just brilliant when we meet up with others who are also living in love with Jesus! We have so much love to share, and their love encourages us if our love is ever flagging. Why would you **not** want to meet up with others who are following the Way of Jesus?!

And what about those who don't have a relationship? How do we relate to them?

Whoa, hang on! What did I just say there? I think we need to check that out. Let's go back to what I said last time: What is a relationship?<sup>[200]</sup>

“Well, it's when two persons get to know one another, and each begins to feel that the other is really rather special.”

So what about Joan Smith? Does she have a relationship with God? I mean, she wouldn't call herself a Christian. No, maybe not yet, but what does God say about her? “Joan? Oh yes, I'm *specially* fond of her!” (Do read *The Shack* if you haven't already.)

I don't know about your church, but I was always taught that unless and until Joan “makes a commitment” or “prays the prayer” she doesn't have a relationship with God. But is that biblical?

Does God love Joan? Yes! Did God create Joan? Yes! Is Joan a child of God? Yes, I believe so. She might not know it yet, but yes, she is.

How can we help Joan to *realise* her privileged position as one-loved-by-God? Well, the starting point is us: we have to *show* her God's love. Anything else? Yes, it would help if somehow we could introduce her to Jesus, the human face of God. How can Joan develop her relationship with someone she knows very little about?!

And this is indeed exactly the gospel, as preached by the early church: the full story of Jesus.

So am I a universalist? Am I saying that everyone will be saved? Almost, but not quite. If you're a parent, and your child (of whatever age) is going wrong, do you stop loving them? Do they become not-your-child? So, until the very end, God will go on loving and trying to draw Joan by cords of love. Only by the ultimate, deliberate refusal can she cut herself off from God. So no, not a universalist, but a 'Godly love extremist' (or something).

“Can a woman forget her nursing child, or lack compassion for the son of her womb? Even if she could forget, I will not forget you!”<sup>[Is 49:15]</sup> ... not to mention Hosea – **totally** unreasonable love! Even the Old Testament, where God doesn't get a good press, preaches 'Godly love extremism'.

Ours then (as God's) is to go on loving people, unreasonably.

Paul Bev. 21.2.22

## 202 *What shape is your church?*

Have you ever stopped to think what the Christian faith is all about, fundamentally, essentially? How would you sum it up for a Martian? How would you sum it up in a few words?

Would you write mainly about the Godhead, how God creates the universe, out of love, and humans make rather a mess of things (nothing new there!), but how God goes on loving us; then how God enters the world in person and shows us how we can transform the suffering in the world, how to live in love with one another?

Or would you concentrate more on how I, as an individual, have rebelled against God, but how I can be forgiven, and therefore how I can escape the suffering of this world and get to heaven? And maybe you'd stress how God miraculously takes away some of the suffering of this world?

Sure, I've overstated the difference in approach, but which more nearly describes what the Martian would see in your church life? A stress on personal salvation, how **I** relate to God, or a stress on who God is, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and therefore how **we** can relate to God?

Given the incredible growth the early church, what did they mainly focus on?

I've just done a page count, and *over half* of the New Testament consists of a telling of the story of Jesus (the good news, the gospel), and if you see the Acts as the continuing story of Jesus, then it's almost two-thirds.

If we add in the fact that the only 'Bible' the early church had was what we now call the Old Testament, what does that suggest was their focus?

Maybe they focused on the story of Jesus and how it is intimately tied in to the whole story and thread and direction of the (OT) Scriptures. The gospel story of Jesus as the Christ interlocks with the story of God in the Old Testament.

And in the early centuries, as the church mushroomed, how did they provide a framework to help keep the church focused on the important things, and to avoid error? They provided the creeds, which focus on the **nature of God**, and concentrate on the essential elements of **the story of Jesus** (= the gospel), and they also briefly mention 'forgiveness of sins'.

So how does that relate to what I have spent hours and hours thinking and writing about for the past five years? What was my prime complaint, my prime concern? It was about whether penal substitution was the right/best/only way to understand personal salvation. Narrow, or what?!

As an exercise (which I haven't tried yet) if your church has a doctrinal statement why not hold it up against the prime concerns of the New Testament church?

If your church calls itself a "cross-centered church" is that because it focuses on how the cross transforms suffering, or because it focuses primarily on personal salvation?

Paul Bev. 5.3.22

## **203 The genius of God – the folly of man**

I'm still trying to work out how a motley crew of eleven fishermen became about a million Christians by AD100 and 44 million by AD500.<sup>[198]</sup> And remember, those eleven lived in one particular place, had one particular language and one specific culture, and yet those 44 million people must have spoken various different languages and had a wide variety of cultural norms.

The sheer genius of God is quite staggering. How did God do that? If we could capture that, we'd have that 'vision for world evangelism' that I've been seeking.

What materials did God use? The disciples started from their sense of ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’ <sup>Luke 24:32</sup> It was the realisation that everything that had happened was ‘according to the Scriptures’.

I’m no expert, but here’s how I view the progression of the available materials + [numbers of believers]:

OT + oral tradition of the story and words of Jesus [hundreds]

OT + that oral tradition + some letters written by church leaders (the Letters) [tens of thousands]

OT + written accounts of the story and words of Jesus (the Gospels) [hundreds of thousands]

The key to this cross-cultural evangelism is that it is based solely on the story and words of Jesus. Each culture and language group was able to make it real for their own people because story is such a powerful medium for communicating cross-culturally. Genius!

Story is all very well, but how was theological purity maintained, rebutting some of the heresies that were creeping in? The church leaders got together, and the traditional baptismal statements were formed into the Apostles’ Creed and later refined into the Nicene Creed – specifying what exactly? Seems to me they speak mainly about the nature of God and the essential points of the story of Jesus; they do mention ‘forgiveness of sins’ but not the how.

But hang on! ‘Campaign for world evangelism’? Didn’t Europeans copy the genius of God by creating a worldwide expansion of the Christian faith starting in the 16th and 17th centuries, cleverly piggybacking colonial expansion? Well, sort of.

I’m no historian but here’s my vast oversimplification of what happened: Following the Reformation, we had two very definite, clearly defined versions of Christianity, with Protestants having a very clear definition of, and insistence on, personal salvation, and we took those and imposed them on a vast range of different cultures.

Instead of allowing the local cultures to take the story of Jesus and enculture it, as God’s genius had done, instead we imposed (or tried to) the western cultural norms and languages onto totally different cultures.

And the rest, as they say, is (messy) history. The genius of God and the massive folly of man!

Paul Bev. 7.3.22

## ***204 It’s a caricature, I know***

(Spoiler warning: Please don’t read this if you haven’t yet watched last week’s episode of the 1960s sleuthing cleric drama, ‘Grantchester’!)

The scene is the body of the church where an 8-year-old boy is scratching some initials into the back of a pew, and the grumpy old housekeeper catches him and screams, “You wicked, wicked boy! You’re desecrating the church, and you’ll burn in hell for this!”

Eventually, we discover that the boy is inscribing the initials of his recently deceased father, and that the housekeeper has been diagnosed with cancer; God is punishing her, she thinks, because as a teenager she was encouraged to have an illegal abortion.

OK, it’s a caricature, but Someone Else used caricature and hyperbole (see: camel, eye, needle) to make us stop and (re)think; Jesus wants us to ‘repent’, i.e. to *change our whole way of thinking*.

But I’m still on about the difference between the churches in the 1st and 21st centuries; why is ours such a pale reflection? Could part of it be our total obsession with sin?



Confession time: The service leader asks us to “Call to mind those wrongful thoughts, words and actions that we have committed,” but try as I may I can’t think of any! Sure, I’m not perfect and I tend to be selfish but I honestly can’t think of anything specific. Is that just me?!

Maybe this is part of the 1/21 contrast? Were the early church thinking about *personal* sin and *personal* salvation when they prayed (“as Jesus taught us”): Forgive *us our* trespasses, as *we* forgive those who trespass against *us*?

Another of my ‘stuck records’: we have perverted Romans 6:23, “the wages of sin is death” (addressed to *believers*); we memorise it and use it to tell *unbelievers* that they will go to hell if they don’t believe in Jesus.

Here’s how I see our current unhelpful (unbiblical?) model of the Christian life:

### **Faith as personal salvation**

SIN = going against God’s way – it’s built-in, at birth!

But God loves us and so sends Jesus

We ‘have faith’, i.e. we believe what (the preacher tells us) ‘the Bible tells us’

We can now enter the fold: ‘Narrow is the gate’

Then as new believers we have to be disciplined

*(church leaders know what a difficult job this is)*

- read the Bible!
- pray!
- go to church!
- witness to others!
- do some good works!

Yes, OK, a caricature, but how about something like this instead?

### **Faith as knowing a person, Jesus**

People hear the story of this amazing man

They sense the love of the community of believers

They hear more of the historic story of how God relates to people

Gradually they begin to feel they belong to the community

Those who suffer through the sins of others find understanding

They come to realise that they are not sinless

They grow in love and trust of Jesus

Together we fight valiantly under the banner of Christ against sin, the world, and the devil

OK, this is an un-thought-out model, but it recognises the problem of ‘sin’ and suffering, as distinct from just ‘my sins’.

Paul Bev. 3.4.22

## **205 ‘Who is my neighbour?’**

In relation to my work, I just met ‘Rev John Smith’, and we started to chat about faith. How do I explain to him what I now believe? Why am I so happy in the church I found five years ago? (Indeed, why am I so happy with the faith direction I’m travelling now?)

The first good sign was the feeling that ‘Everyone in this church is so welcoming!’ – and loads of people say the same, including local people *who don’t come to church* (my neighbour said exactly that yesterday). The second thing we noticed was the wide range of churchmanship: high, low, charismatic, traditional. No, I’m not saying it’s the ideal church, but *something* is different.

As my articles attest, I set about thinking, ‘Well, what *do* I believe? What *does* the Bible teach?’ and so I have challenged what ‘the (evangelical) church’ has taught me for almost 50 years.

Latterly, I’ve been grappling with why the C21 church is so different from the C1 church, and I think I’d express it in a single word: community.

In the OT, God tried to drum into the Jews the importance of caring for the outcast and the stranger and making them part of the community. Then Jesus taught his disciples the same thing, and the C1 church epitomised it.

And what does society need most today? Community. In a society where individualism is rife – every man for himself – we need to work together in community: locally, regionally, nationally, internationally.

I’m really proud of my son, Tim, who is battling against individualism in education, encouraging schools to become better learning *communities*; in particular, he’s trying to build an accreditation system that values the individual, and yet places top priority on schools being better communities.

While the religious of Jesus’ day taught individualism, the C1 church taught inclusion – they even (eventually) welcomed Gentiles into the church! That inclusivity, I believe, is why it grew so very rapidly. Yes, miraculous things happened, but what convinced people that this was a real work of God – and so they wanted to be part of it – was the transformed life of the community.

I believe that, as churches, we need to battle against ‘sin’, where ‘sin’ is anything that destroys community, that puts me and my needs and wants above those of others. But sin also takes the form of structural evil – aspects of society that crush the individual and destroy community.

As churches we need to affirm people who, like my Tim, are fighting to create a better society, regardless of their faith allegiance. We need to work together with people of all faiths and none.

Yes, Jesus is distinctive, but if our main aim in life, as Christians, is to tell everyone else (including people in other churches!) that we are right, and they are wrong, then the whole world will disintegrate into self-seeking individualism: locally, regionally, nationally, internationally.

Paul Bev. 21.4.22

## 206 God can't do that!

*How can God forgive my sins?* – Has anyone ever actually asked you that? In over 50 years as a Christian, I don't think anyone has. However, if I were asked, I think I could give an answer... and so could you: "Jesus died on the cross... etc, etc." Whether we are confident in expressing it or not, we **know** how it's done – we've been told a million times.

*Yes, but is that the **only** way?* (Clearly, we've got an awkward customer here!) We reply that, yes, it is the only way – and perhaps we can manage a few scriptures to prove it.

*Did God forgive people in the Old Testament?* Well, yes, but...

*How could Jesus forgive people even **before** he had died on the cross?* I guess that's because he was God, and God can do anything.

*Well, did Jesus say to his disciples, 'If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'* <sup>[Jn 20:23]</sup> Yes, I suppose he did, but...

Do you see where I'm going with this? We've had it drummed into us by constant repetition (a.k.a. 'indoctrination') that **God can ONLY** forgive sins in one way, by one mechanism.

So can a baby or young child, unable to understand about Jesus' death, not be freed from sin?

Or an adult of limited mental capacity? Can they not be forgiven?

Who are we to say, "**God can ONLY...**"?!

In the past few years, I've been spending more and more time in the Gospels, and I've constantly been surprised by things that Jesus said about his Father. I think what I've realised is how unlike, say, the prodigal father my image of God was.

God is absolutely besotted with us; he loves us more than we could ever imagine and if, like the younger son, we show the slightest inclination to head in the general direction of home, he comes racing down the road to greet us. No time for rehearsed speeches – *shoes, robe, ring, party!*

The first time I tried to write this article, I started with:

*Have you ever lost your faith? I did, ten years ago, and it's a **very** lonely place. All that I had built my life on was gone! For five years I tried to rebuild it, but it still didn't feel real. But then, as I wrote last time,<sup>[205]</sup> I finally discovered a lovely community, based a form of faith I could relate to.*

There's nothing wrong with that paragraph, but I think what I *really* found was the total, utter and **unconditional** love of God. And I've never been happier!

[End of article] No need to say any more – well short of my allotted 500 words!

## 207 Who's prodigal now?

Have you come across this idea where, each day, you sit and write out, in a notebook, ten verses of one of the Gospels? I love it. It means you have to go very slowly over the verses and really absorb them, and I'm constantly amazed by how often I see something I've never noticed before.

The past two days has been Luke 15:11-32, probably the most life-changing parable for me these past few exciting years, and although I've written about it often, it bore in on me yet again and so I wanted to write about it, perhaps referring to it as 'revision'. (And when I checked to see what I had written about last time,<sup>[206]</sup> guess what *that* featured!)

So, I wonder if anyone 'theological' could help me. I would dearly love to find a written sermon on this passage from the early centuries of the church's life. I'm willing to bet that it focuses more on the prodigal love of God and less on 'the prodigal son', as we call this famous parable.

In any case, why don't we call it 'the parable of the self-righteous son'?!

My guess is that the early-church sermon would focus more on the ridiculous over-the-top love of the father, ignoring social conventions, racing down the road, long robes hitched up, hugging his smelly, pig-stained son, ignoring his 'Father, I have sinned' speech, ordering a party.

And focusing on the way the father 'goes outside' to the other son. Again, ignoring social conventions, the host leaves the party, to draw in his other son.

Anyway, as I wrote out those verses, I thought about the younger son's motives. Did he **really** realise the weight of his sin? Or was it more that 'and he began to be in need' – he was starving, and having to feed **pigs** of all things!

The Father wants us to come into his love in any way we're willing. Well, maybe God would prefer if our theology were more correct, but God is 'patient, not wanting anyone to perish', and will use anyone prepared to help draw people into that love, even when they are wrong.

No, for my money this is about God's totally consuming desire to get his son(s) back, whatever the cost, and however little they were motivated to inch in the vague direction of home.

What I really love about our church is that we're so totally obsessed by the love of God that people who don't even attend the church are attracted by that love. So, non-church-goers invite their friends to Toddler Tunes on a Tuesday morning, where Sue and I serve tea and buns, and the children, parents, grandparents and child-minders play with toys in the chancel, while other, mostly (now) single, older folk sit and chat.

Call me theologically careless if you like, but I just want people to know God's love so that, when they 'begin to be in need', they will know where they can come.

## 208 Thanks for the prodigal sermon

After my last article, four people responded with encouragement and ideas. Thanks! One sent a very helpful sermon – not from the early centuries, but a modern American YouTube offering.

This morning, I started writing out Luke 16, but stopped dead in my tracks after the first four words: *Jesus told his disciples...* This emphasised what the sermon was saying.

So in my journey, in putting aside 'what I've always been taught', I've realised the importance of *context*, and my YT man looked at the whole of Luke 15 (lost coin, lost sheep and the mistitled 'prodigal son'). He stressed verses 1-3:

Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering round to hear him. But the *Pharisees and the teachers of the law* muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.'  
Then Jesus told *them* this parable: ... (*my italic*)

Unlike Luke 16, where Jesus was talking to his *disciples*, here he is aiming at the *Pharisees*. And who among us has never been pharisaic in our attitudes?! And isn't that partly what gives the church such a bad name?

So I picture Jesus' followers crowding round him, hanging on his every word, loving every minute. And, at the back, keeping their distance to avoid contamination, the prosperous, well-dressed Pharisees... muttering.

My YT man showed how Jesus' sermon reeled the Pharisees in: 'Yes', they say, 'the farmer would indeed rejoice over the lost sheep', and 'Yes, the poor woman would rejoice', and 'Yes, the father would rejoice when that awful, terrible SINNER came grovelling back to the father!'

They were probably saying, or at least thinking, 'Thank God that we know what's right, and we have served God properly all our lives.' Then Jesus tells them about the older brother. Ouch!

I spent 45 years faithfully serving God, and thinking I was doing things right, but I wasn't really happy in my faith. OK, I think that God graciously used me to persuade a few people that Jesus died for them, and they came to believe, but I always felt I had to sort of apologise for my faith.

It's not about 'getting it right'; it's about rejoicing in the open-armed, welcoming love of God, even though I've still got all sorts of things wrong.

Don't you love how, by the Spirit's power, a given set of Jesus' words can speak so powerfully in different ways to different people at different times!

I knew there was something special when I joined St Ed's; I could see that there were people with differing views, but that there was clearly a party going on, so I joined in.

And now my main job is to welcome other people into this community on *whatever terms they are happy with*. So, if that's tea, toys and toasted teacakes on Tuesday, they are very welcome. And it works; people are joining the party!

Paul Bev. 22.5.22

## **209 What should we be praying for?**

In your church experience, when your leaders have urged the whole church to pray, what has it been about? Yes, national and international emergencies, of course, but what else? What do they ask you to pray for in a sustained way?

For me it has been, "Pray for x-number of specific named people to be saved."

In the recent resurgence of my faith, the thing I find most difficult is intercessory prayer: what should I be praying for, Lord? What's most important to you? Lord, please teach me to pray!

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours  
now and for ever.  
Amen.

Just 63 very powerful words.

Start rock-solid in your relationship: you are utterly, utterly loved by your heavenly Father.

Your Father is also Sovereign of the Universe; let's then revere God.

Prime importance? Jesus' prime motive in his life: bringing God's kingdom on earth!

What does that kingdom look like? Bread and forgiveness. Just imagine how very, very different the world would be if everyone had enough to eat, and we forgave one another. What a vision!

Evil is very real; help us not to walk into it, but rescue us when it does come to us and to others.

We rest secure in the knowledge that God is King – and always will be. Amen.

This is what I pray for every day. And I walk secure, knowing I have nothing to prove. I've never felt more content, knowing that God's kingdom is here, now, and is growing, like a mustard seed.

Paul Bev. 7.6.22

## 210 *The way ahead*

This is just a set of random jottings, inspired by having found what feels to be an important book for me: *How God Became King*, by 'Tom Wright', and not by 'NT Wright', i.e. written for the more general reader rather than theological experts. But...

After I had read the two-thirds of it I realised I was struggling to grasp the fundamentals so I restarted – took another run at it – and I was glad I did; it made me see echoes of a lot of the threads from my own five-year journey since I wrote, 'Full circle'.<sup>[0]</sup>

My exploration started when a single sentence at the beginning of Richard Rohr's *The Divine Dance* exploded into my brain, saying that faith should not be '*propositional* and *transactional*', but **relational** and **mysterious** – that expressed *exactly* how I felt.

Here are a few themes that have emerged during my journey:

- The huge importance of God’s overall plan being to bless the world through Abraham.
- The importance of the exodus as an underlying theme through the New Testament (Jesus’ death didn’t just *happen* to be at Passover).
- Salvation as a journey, ‘the way’.
- Faith as community.
- A restored emphasis on the gospels – they’ve been largely ignored in favour of Paul’s theology.
- A false emphasis on ‘getting saved’ and ‘going to heaven’, so church leaders find ‘discipleship’ hard to sell, and ‘social action’ is almost looked down on.
- The importance of the **whole** Bible, i.e. the Old Testament is the essential foundation for the New Testament – Christ came to fulfil it, make sense of it, complete it.
- Seeing the Bible as inspired, yet as written by fallible people who held a specific worldview and had a developing understanding of God’s nature. (I love how God inspired authors and hid gems in seams that later generations could recognise – “Didn’t our hearts burn within us...!”)
- The creation story as the story of God entering his temple. Then God enters the physical temple. In the new creation, God again comes to dwell in his temple, but *we* are the temple of God.
- The importance of the church’s creeds (but Tom adds, plus the canon of scripture, esp. gospels).
- The huge importance of the Lord’s prayer.
- And suffering fits into the mix somewhere, too.
- A recognition of my own pharisaism.

Random thoughts. Maybe some of them have become important to you, too.

Finally an illustration that might help you in your ‘relationship’ with the Bible. As you read a book – any book – you get a bit of an understanding of what the characters are like, and as you get to the end you can see more how it fits together. Now go back and reread the book and, in the light of what you now know from the later parts, you can understand and interpret some of the things that seemed mysterious at first read.

That’s a bit how it feels for me as I follow the way ahead. So exciting!

I suspect you’ll be hearing more about *How God Became King*.

Paul Bev. 3.7.22

## 211 What’s this ‘Holy Communion’?

Whether you call it ‘Holy Communion’ or ‘Eucharist’ or ‘The Lord’s Supper’ or ‘Mass’, and whether your church tradition has a highly complex ritual or a relatively simple (even if subliminal) liturgy attached to it, what IS it? If a Martian (or a non-churchgoer!) asked what you were doing *and why*, what would you say?

On the basis of challenging ‘what I’ve always been taught’, I’d like to go back to first principles, and so I have to try hard not to read *back* into the pages of Scripture what we do in 2022.

This all started as I was writing out the words of Luke 22, where it says that he took the cup, gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you". But *then* he takes the bread, gives thanks and gives it to them. Hang on, that's the wrong way round!

Luke 22:15-22 *And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfilment in the kingdom of God." After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him."*

So what else do the Scriptures give us?

Matt 26:26-29 *While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."*

Mark 14:22-25 *While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. "I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God."*

1 Cor 11:23-26. *For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

That's not a lot to go on. How did we get from that to what we do in 2022 – and the complex beliefs that we attach to it?

But I suppose we should add this, which seems to be about having **an actual meal together**:

1 Cor 11:27-34 *Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. So then, my brothers, **when you come together to eat**, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions.*

Not a lot to go on, is there? It looks as if we're right to "do this" (Passover meal) more often than once a year, and it looks as if it's about remembering, and about giving thanks.

But I wonder if we've lost the significance that must have been huge in the minds of first believers: this is God with us in the Passover – a once-and-for-all Passover.

But as I say, how did we get from this to what we do and believe today?!

Answers on a postcard, please.



## 212 Justifiable genocide?

People who were brought up as Christians turn away for a number of reasons. Here's the essence of one I met this week: "The final straw was a preacher who said that Israelites wiping cities off the map was really an act of self-defence against the diseases of the morally faulted; this read (and still reads) to me an awful lot like a narrative of righteous genocide."

Do you ever feel nervous about this aspect of the Old Testament? It was certainly part of the mix when I lost my faith 11 years ago.

Fast forward to last Wednesday, when the preacher at our Communion service asked a very interesting question – she's always very thought-provoking. "Did Jesus have to learn?" As a human baby he learned to walk and then he learned to use woodworking tools but did he have to learn about God?

We know little of Jesus' childhood, but Luke 2:46 tells us that, at age 12, "After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions." I wonder if he asked them about passages like Deut 7 and 20, where God instructs the Israelites to completely destroy various tribes, lest they be polluted by their religious practices?

Jesus knew the love of his earthly mother and father and was totally secure in his heavenly Father's love, I'm sure. So what did he make of God as portrayed in Deuteronomy? How did he cope with the apparent clash between the Person he knew so well, and those passages?

He certainly didn't reject the Scriptures; his whole ministry was based on them. He said he had come to fulfil them, and after his resurrection "he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

So did he just ignore these difficult passages, as we often do? I wonder if he ever talked about this issue when "He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him." Lk 4:15?

In my allotted 500 words, I can do no more than express the problem, but being a very analytic sort of person, I have had to think it through for myself. The turning point was reading (several times, as it's not an easy read) *Cross Vision* by Greg Boyd, who originally tried to justify the preacher's view I started with here, but then he spent 10 years writing a massive tome to try to work out how Jesus would have interpreted Deut 7 & 20 (and many other difficult passages).

But don't worry, *Cross Vision* is the more accessible version (think Tom Wright style, as opposed to N.T. Wright), and for an introduction to the ideas of the book, you could try reading my excited ramblings<sup>[124-129]</sup> in 2020 (4000 words).

Suffice to say that I no longer feel the need to justify my belief that God inspired all the Scriptures, and that, along with the young Jesus, we can understand how the Scriptures show us the amazing love of our heavenly Father.

Paul Bev. 7.8.22

## 213 Unjustifiable genocide!

OK, Paul, you say that the preacher<sup>[212]</sup> was wrong in his interpretation of Deuteronomy chapters 7 and 22. You even imply that Jesus would agree with you! But it *does* say that "when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy."<sup>[Deut 7:2]</sup>

Also, Paul, you say you believe that the Bible is true, right? And if that's what the Bible says, then that's true; that really is what God told them to do!

No, sorry, my Christian friend, that's way too simplistic an interpretation. You've seen what Jesus was like, defeating evil by sheer goodness and non-violence. Would Jesus have tried to justify that kind of genocide?! When Jesus "taught in the synagogues", did he say, "What the Scripture says is true: my loving heavenly Father told them to kill every man, woman and child! He didn't want His people to be corrupted by their moral impurity." No, I don't buy that, sorry!

I can't explain in 500 words why that interpretation is mistaken – way too simplistic. But I can try to give you a few pointers. Remember that when God said to Abraham, 4000 years ago, "I want to bring blessing to the whole world through you", the world was a very different place. For example, child sacrifice was not unusual – remember that Abraham actually thought that God was asking **him** to kill his own son and burn his body!

Genocide and slavery were pretty common in those days; it was kill or be killed, subjugate or be subjugated. So God had a **massive** job on his hands to civilise humankind, and the process would take years – thousands of years. (Indeed, God's job isn't finished yet, sadly.)

While I believe totally that God **inspired** the writers of the Bible, they nevertheless held the worldview of their own times and places, and so **their view of God was distorted**. Only when God came in person, could we really see what God is like.

You can't change the world overnight, so in order to civilise the world, to bring blessing to the whole world, God was willing to be misunderstood by the people of the time. That's the thesis of Greg Boyd's book, *Cross Vision*.

And as a final pointer, remember just how easy it is to be too simplistic, saying "God ought to..." What do **you** think God ought to do? How about this?

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." [Exodus 34:5-7]

Jesus would agree: his loving heavenly Father forgives us all. But would God forgive someone who had tortured and killed children? No, you say? Well, exactly where do you draw the line?!

We are just too simplistic (dualistic) in our view of life and the Bible.

Paul Bev. 9.8.22

## **214 Parenting: message, mission, method**

If you're a parent, what is the most important thing you want to convey to your children (whether that's little children or grown-up children)? That they are loved and accepted.

Insofar as you have any influence over your children, what is your aim for them? I'd suggest that you want them to learn how to live in love with others, to forgive others, and when they have fights and hurt one another, to restore those relationships.

We've got a **message** and a **mission**, so what's our **method** as parents? Difficult, isn't it? Do we set rules, do we allow them a free-for-all so they can learn what works and what doesn't – or somewhere in between? We could probably discuss this for hours.

What about a Loving Heavenly Parent? Well, it seems clear to me that, end to end, the Bible's message is one of love and acceptance – realism about evil, yes, but love and acceptance.

I would argue that God's **mission**, over the centuries, has been to gradually help humankind to learn how to live in harmony – as any good parent would – but here the analogy breaks down.

When a baby is born, they are absolutely dependent on us, and so we can exercise control. But as humans emerged from the Stone Age, it was survival of the fittest, kill or be killed. God has a very difficult parenting task, but as the Bible makes clear, God has an overall plan, starting from the promise to Abraham: "All peoples on the whole earth will be blessed through you (and your descendants)."

The **method** was to show us how to live in love with one another by actually coming and being born as a human, to demonstrate that it is possible to live in love.

The Bible also suggests that it isn't just a matter of educating people; there is such a thing as evil, and evil has to be defeated. People who have succumbed to evil have to be restored, but how? How are people to be forgiven and restored?

So, God's central **message** is love and acceptance; God's **mission** is to defeat evil and restore relationships; God's **method** is to overcome evil with good. Jesus took the full force of human evil – the worst that people could do to a fellow human – and triumphed over it, once and for all.

So what is our part in all this, as those who seek to follow Jesus? By our lives and our words, we show and tell God's love, acceptance, forgiveness and restoration through the life, death, resurrection and kingly reign of Jesus (something like that, anyway).

*But what I have reacted against is a church whose essential message is: "You are evil and you are rejected by God unless and until you believe the following... Only then can you be accepted by the loving God, otherwise you are condemned. That's what the Bible teaches!"*

That's basically what I communicated for almost 50 years. Not surprising that this 'good news' has largely fallen on deaf ears!

Paul Bev. 23.10.22

## **215 We've been brainwashed by the church!**

After my last pontification, my friend 'John' gave me some more feedback. He was concerned, I think, at my statement that, 'God's central **message** is love and acceptance; God's **mission** is to defeat evil and restore relationships; God's **method** is to overcome evil with good.'

His first response was, 'the tenor of scripture puts repentance before restoration through Jesus' salvation', which I take to mean that we need first to concentrate (with unbelievers?) on sin before we can meaningfully talk about restoration.

But one of the problems, which I've exercised before,<sup>[26,27]</sup> is the currently accepted meaning of 'repentance': *to feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or sin* (OED). So it's about me and what I do wrong and how I feel about it.

That is **not** the meaning of the Greek word *metanoia*, which most Bibles translate as 'repentance'.

I've just finished Tom Wright's *Hebrews for Everyone*, and his definition of repentance has it as 'turning back'. So yes, it's turning away from sin, but it's about turning back to God, to a person, and he also points to it being 'linked to the idea of return from exile' – more of a focus on God's rescue rather than on me, my sin, and my sorrow.

John also said ‘Jesus criticises the church for not repenting – of sin, immorality etc.’, which made me think of the first chapters of Revelation, and as I’m just about to start Wright’s *Revelation for Everyone*, I scanned Revelation (and then the whole NT) for ‘repent...’.

Yes, the Bible does sometimes talk of turning away from ‘doing wrong’, but not always, and there’s also a strong strand of wrong *teaching* being the key issue... which brings me to my title.

My friend also commented that ‘Christians also need to always be repenting’, and so my thought was ‘What kind of repenting?’ and this is where I think we’ve been brainwashed by the church.

How about this prayer of confession at Communion? It was my introduction to the faith as a student in 1968:

Almighty God,  
Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
maker of all things, judge of all men:  
We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness,  
which we from time to time most grievously have committed,  
by thought, word, and deed, against thy divine Majesty,  
provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us.  
We do earnestly repent,  
and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings;  
the remembrance of them is grievous unto us,  
the burden of them is intolerable.  
Have mercy upon us,  
have mercy upon us, most merciful Father;  
for thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ’s sake,  
forgive us all that is past;  
and grant that we may ever hereafter  
serve and please thee in newness of life,  
to the honor and glory of thy Name;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

OK, the Communion service goes on to emphasize Jesus’ loving sacrifice for us, but what a start when you come to church to deepen your relationship with this loving God!

This prayer has been used for well over *three hundred years*, so the OED’s definition of ‘repentance’ comes not from the Bible but from the Prayer Book!

Few people use this 1662 prayer now, but maybe service leaders should check that we’re praying something more metanoia-like (i.e. biblical), emphasizing that it’s only by God’s work of grace that we can ‘turn back’.

As the prostitute quoted by Philip Yancey on page 1 of *What’s so amazing about grace?* says, ‘Church! Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse!’

Paul Bev. 31.10.22

## **216 A question of morality?**

We should be salt and light in society, right? We should be careful not to get dragged along by the cultural slide, OK? If something is morally wrong, we should speak out against it, yes?

The only slight snaglet is: how do we decide if something **is** morally right or wrong? We use the Bible, of course, but it first has to be (translated and) interpreted and then applied.

When it comes to sexual immorality, Christians have been particularly outspoken, but with good reason: (a) sexual immorality, in terms of both betrayal and domination, is massively destructive of human relationships and (b) the sex drive is so strong that it can sweep away logic, reason and common sense – and biblical interpretation.

So how should we do our interpretation and application of Scripture? And today I have in mind the issue of gay sex, one of particular importance within today's church.

So here are the guidelines I want to suggest:

- 1) *Beware basing your views on your personal feelings.*
- 2) *Be willing to challenge 'what we've always been taught'.*

As an illustration, I used to think that gay sex was clearly immoral, but that was based purely on (1) my feelings and (2) what I was taught. Study the Bible? No need, it's obvious!

- 3) *Be willing to accept that science can inform biblical interpretation.*

– We no longer believe that the sun revolves around the earth, despite what the Bible says clearly, and the NT writers believed.  
– Given the evidence that beating children can cause psychological damage, Christians generally have moved away from the Bible writers' view, although some Christians do still say it's right to beat children.  
– We probably have a range of views on evolution/creation, but we do need to look at the science and at our Bibles and be willing to change our views, if necessary.

- 4) *We do need to very careful what things we call 'morally wrong'.*

Murder? Sure, I don't have a problem with naming that, but what about divorce? The church has softened its stance on divorce in my lifetime, but is that just succumbing to 'cultural slide'?

What sparked this whole line of thinking was this statement from a commentary on Rev 2:12-17. It's from a senior Christian leader whose teaching I respect and greatly admire, and whose writings have been hugely formative of my renewed faith (my bold):

**Sexual morality** isn't, as it is so often portrayed, a matter of ancient rules clung to by some rather conservative persons when the rest of society has moved on. It [**i.e. sexual morality**] is, rather, a matter of the call of the creator God to faithful **man-plus-woman** marriage, reflecting the complementarity of heaven and earth themselves. ... Married love is a signpost to the faithfulness of the creator to his creation. The reason **immorality** is so often coupled with idolatry...

It seems to me that the writer is framing gay sex as immoral, and yet the passage has nothing to do with gay sex, as far as I can see, just sexual immorality.

So I wonder what the writer would say to two strong Christians who are in a loving, faithful, same-sex relationship? That couple (and a growing number of Christians generally) have changed/are changing their views on gay sex, as long as it's in the context (as with all sex) of a faithful relationship.

(If you do want to consider revisiting your views, I'd recommend David Gushee's *Changing our mind*, the unnamed book behind my articles <sup>[145-157]</sup>.)

Paul Bev. 9.11.22

## **217 Get your metanoia right!**

I've just realised how my last two articles fit together to illustrate a fundamental error that I've made throughout my Christian life.

Are you old enough to remember the phrases ‘living in sin’ and ‘born out of wedlock’ – to have used of other people, even? I remember discussions when we first got married about one of Sue’s colleagues; Sue was insistent that even though she was ‘living together’ with someone, she was still her friend. (Anyway, as the church never tires of pointing out, we’re all ‘living in sin’, every day, and we need to ‘repent’ of those sins.<sup>[215]</sup>)

I remember thinking (but not wanting to argue with Sue!), ‘But what difference does a piece of paper make?! Surely, if they are committed together, that’s what really matters!’ Even then I was a radical, and you might argue that I was on the slippery slope of letting the world influence my thinking, rather than sticking to what the Bible teaches – and look where that has got me!<sup>[216]</sup>

Now, in my recent studies of Revelation, with my hero Tom Wright, I’ve been keeping an eye out for what John says about our metanoia (I’m deliberately not using the R-word), and it seems to me that he’s mainly telling the Christians they must **turn back to their first love**.

How many of you, like me, felt an overwhelming sense of joy when you first came to faith, only to lose it again (and again and again in my case – see my very first article.<sup>[10]</sup>)

What went wrong for me? What went wrong for the church? What has caused the world’s view of Christians to be that of narrow-minded people always telling others how to behave?

Here’s how I’d express it: Metanoia is biblical, ‘repentance’ (in our current use of the word) is not. Metanoia is about relationship, repentance tends to focus ethics – right and wrong actions.

We need to recapture God’s heart, God’s main concern. I think God would say to us, at every church service, ‘Metanoia back to me!’ And if we return to our first love, time and time again, then our ethics will follow; we’ll do what’s right because we love God so much.

Now let’s turn to the ‘elephant in the room’. How will you relate to the gay Christian couple in your congregation who have studied their Bibles and come up with a different answer from you about the ethics of gay sex? Indeed, how will you relate to me? I now believe that I have allowed my feelings about gay sex, plus ‘what I’ve always been taught’, to form my view of sexual ethics.

I’m not telling you that my understanding of Scripture is right, but I am insistent that we should regularly metanoia, and we should never, ever look down on someone who has a different view of biblical ethics. I certainly could never say that gay sex is immoral, sorry!

If you do want to consider revisiting your views on sexual ethics, I’d recommend David Gushee’s *Changing our mind*, the unnamed book behind my articles.<sup>[145-157]</sup>

Paul Bev. 12.11.22

## 218 Metanoia rules!

I’m afraid my mentioning the issue of gay sex has caused a bit of a stir, sorry. Can we put that to one side and look at the main issue: **God wants the church to metanoia!** And I think that’s the main message God has been trying to drum into me over 218 articles.

(The recent ‘FREE SAMPLE’ of articles sums it up, I think, though it’s ~7000 words.)

I’ve finished studying Revelation 1–3 with Tom Wright, and it says to me: **metanoia rules!** The church needs to metanoia or it’s dead; dead in the world’s eyes and dead in God’s eyes.

I asked<sup>[215]</sup> what the Bible meant by repentance (metanoia) and Rev 1–3 says it’s: Your **love** has waned, your **teaching** is wrong and your **works** are not complete, so **metanoia** or else!

‘Metanoia and do the things you did at first. If you do not metanoia, I will come to you and remove your lampstand’<sup>2:6</sup>

‘Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Metanoia therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.’<sup>2:16</sup>

‘Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and metanoia. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.’<sup>3:3</sup>

**Warning:** ‘Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and metanoia. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.’<sup>3:17</sup>

**Promise:** ‘Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.’<sup>3:20</sup>

That last one is probably the only verse in this book that any of us can quote, and that in a way proves my point. God is warning the **church to metanoia** or else!... and we lift that single verse out of context to tell **non-believers** to ‘**give your heart to Jesus**’.

So tell me I’m wrong. Tell me the church has *not* lost its first overwhelming love for God and for people. Tell me that we’re *not* obsessed with telling ‘them’ that their individual sins are the real problem. If they repent and turn away from their sins, they’ll be given eternal life. Yay!

The world is in a mess; the world needs hope; the world needs community; the world needs self-sacrificing love. What do we offer them? Individual sin, individual salvation so we can escape this sin-infected world to somewhere better. Plus: **we** know about ethics, so **we** say, ‘The Bible teaches that this, that and the other are wrong.’

We need to **metanoia of our wrong teaching** before it’s too late. So what is the modern day Nicolaitan teaching? I think it’s reducing the gospel of the kingdom of Christ to little more than: *Each individual has to be saved by the death of Jesus so that we can go to heaven when we die.*

Metanoia before it’s too late!

Paul Bev. 19.11.22

## 219 Persons matter

After my run-in with Revelation 1–3, I got very vehement last time<sup>[218]</sup> about our willingness, as a church, to metanoia, i.e. to change our minds and turn back to our first love, to reject the wrong teaching that we’ve been fed, and: *Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and metanoia. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief...*<sup>Rev 3:3</sup>

By ‘remember what you have received and heard’ I take it to mean **what the Bible actually teaches**. However, what I’ve said repeatedly is that to understand it and to apply it, we have to (a) check the context into which it was spoken, (b) (for the OT) ask how Jesus interpreted it, and (c) be willing to correct our misinterpretations in the light of new knowledge.

But our overriding hermeneutic (method of interpretation) has to be to follow Jesus in seeking that which builds up our relationships of love – with God and with one another.

To make this more personal, I would ask you to register that, of the 40 people who receive an email each time I write another article, two (statistically speaking) will have a same-sex orientation, through no fault of their own. Let’s call them Anna and Brian (being alphabetic).

So, not wanting to offend them, I’ll tell you what I **used** to think and feel about gay sex – with no thought of whether Anna or Brian are celebrate or not.

**Feel?** Let's just say, 'not positive', and leave it at that. **Think?** The Bible teaching is pretty clear – you can't argue with 'abomination' and 'perversion'. And knowing that some Christians are 'reinterpreting' those passages, clearly (I thought) people are justifying what they **want** to believe, albeit with good motives: to make the church seem less antediluvian, and to help Anna and Brian to feel better about themselves.

Had I looked at what the Bible teaches? Well, yes, I'd read Leviticus 18 + 20, Romans 1, 1 Cor 6 and 1 Tim 1, but I hadn't actually looked at any of the counter arguments to my view. What would be the point? The church's teaching has been clear on this for centuries.

I know, too, that some Christians think the devil is blinding people's minds, in order to maybe split the church, but certainly to make the church compromise biblical truth.

Now, as I was thinking about the devil's activities, this verse came to mind: *The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*<sup>2</sup>  
Cor 4:4

And it occurred to me that 'blinding the minds' refers to encouraging people not to even **consider** that their view might be wrong.

While I don't claim that my view is now 'right', I have thought through the issues via David Gushee's book, *Changing our mind*, and, having changed my mind, I have to be very sure not to judge those Christians with whom I disagree.

Paul Bev. 26.11.22

## ***220 Ethics, attitudes and people***

When we think about sexual ethics, we all want to focus on what the Bible actually teaches, but I want to avoid relying on what we've always been taught – I want to go back to first principles. But we have to remember that this isn't just a theoretical exercise. The putative Anna and Brian I mentioned last time,<sup>[219]</sup> both have an inherent gay orientation, and our loving attitude to them is of huge importance, as it would have been to Jesus (it still is!) if he were here now (he is!).

(If you want to argue against the idea of gay orientation, you'll have to argue with the medical profession and with the Christian organisations here and in the States that tried to 'heal' gay men but that have disbanded, the leaders admitting that they largely failed to do so.)

I want us to think how we form a gay sexual ethic but, to remind us to tread warily, let's recall how the church has slowly and painfully changed its views on divorce and remarriage. People's dogmatic views have, over the years, caused great pain – and we're talking about real people in real situations.

So how do we form our ethic on gay sex? Unlike with divorce, we don't have any direct teaching from Jesus, but we do still have to remember that as Jesus' (and Paul's) teaching on divorce was directed towards a specific culture, so we need here to first see how any teaching applied to their situation, and then try to tease out some principles to apply now.

So when the Bible was formed, in what contexts did men have sex with other men? With thanks to a sermon at one of our readers' churches last Sunday, I gather there were four areas:

- 1) Temple prostitution
- 2) Pederasty (sex with boys)
- 3) Sex with slaves
- 4) Gang rape in the context of warfare



Given that sort of cultural experience, it's hardly surprising that we get the words 'abomination' and 'perversion' in our English translations. But there was no context of male sex within a loving, committed relationship – that was totally absent from their experience.

So when Brian brings his gay partner to our Alpha course, we need to think very, very hard about our attitude! If we are even **thinking** 'abomination' or 'perversion', that is potentially very damaging to our relationship.

Some within the church – myself included – are no longer willing to say that fellow believers in a gay relationship are, in any sense, actively sinning; they have interpreted the biblical ethics on sex within a committed gay relationship differently from 'what we've always been taught', and it's definitely not mine to judge them.

There's a lot I haven't considered here, especially about how we apply the creation principles of one man and one woman, etc. (David Gushee does so in his *Changing our mind*), but for me a simple, 'The Bible teaches that it's wrong, full stop', is no longer acceptable.

Paul Bev. 27.11.22

## 221 The plain teaching of Scripture?!

If you hold the traditionalist line that gay sex is a perversion, what would you do if Brian and his partner<sup>[219]</sup> came on your Alpha course? It's OK to say, "Hate the sin, but love the sinner", but how would you counsel Brian and Ian if they came to faith? According to you, they are continuing in their perverse behaviour. Would you allow them to be part of your church and indeed to take communion because, according to you, they are knowingly carrying on sinning?

Personally, I have come to the conclusion – for good biblical reasons, and following the respected ethicist, David Gushee in *Changing our mind* – that, within a committed relationship, gay sex should not be seen as a sin. While I totally accept that other Christians will have a different view, I would argue that Gushee's view is a perfectly legitimate interpretation of Scripture, and that neither of us should judge the other person's view.

And this is not just a theoretical discussion; I am praying that Brians and Ians will feel welcome in our churches and will indeed come to faith. As more and more Christians are changing their minds on this issue, I believe that this will happen in our lifetimes, making gay people feel welcome and fully accepted into our lives.

Now let's consider an example where the church has already changed its mind, where we have changed how we interpret and apply Scripture – not just any Scripture, but Jesus' own words:

*It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, **except for marital unfaithfulness**, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.*<sup>Matt 5:31,32</sup> (my bold)

That teaching is pretty plain, isn't it? Now there are people in our congregations who were divorced due to a relationship breakdown **without any unfaithfulness**, and if you take a purely literal reading of this text, if they remarry, they are committing adultery! But some (many?) of us have changed our mind: we now take a more realistic, compassionate interpretation, because society has changed and because we have taken into account Jesus' wider teaching about (a) loving relationships, and (b) not being judgemental.

Now when Paul lists murder, envy, deceit, God-haters, ruthless, etc.,<sup>Rom 1:29-31</sup> I simply can't see Brian and Ian's loving (physical) relationship as 'perversion' and therefore make it an item in that list. In any case, Paul's purpose in those verses was to then say, 'Therefore, don't you **dare** judge others – you do the same things!'<sup>Rom 2:1</sup> (free paraphrase)

I hope and pray that more and more Christians will be able to put aside their own personal feelings about gay sex, look more carefully at the teaching of the Bible as a whole, and adopt a more compassionate attitude to our brothers and sisters who have a different sexual orientation.

Paul Bev. 29.11.22

## 222 A genuine enquiry

Today's article is by way of a genuine enquiry; I don't pretend to have an answer, though I do have a feeling of direction.

What kind of person would you say the human Jesus was? How does he strike you when you read through the pages of the Gospels? I think it's difficult *not* to see him as an inclusive sort of person, a welcoming sort of person.

Look how he repeatedly defies convention and gives a high priority to women (definitely counter-cultural), to children, to Samaritans, to lepers and other social outcasts, to adultresses – but we never find out what he said to the **man** who was also 'caught in adultery'<sup>Jn 8:3</sup> – and to tax collectors and 'sinners'. (Why does the Bible put 'sinners' in quotes?)

On the other hand, he was, to say the least, 'uncomplementary' towards Bible-believing religious people (e.g. Saul of Tarsus) who had made a real effort to find out what God requires, what was right and what was wrong – *who* was right and *who* was wrong.

But let me now bring in the fact that Jesus said, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me', which seems to me a pretty *exclusive* claim.<sup>Jn 14:6</sup> And what would Jesus say happens to anyone who *doesn't* 'come to the Father'?

We know the answer we've always been taught: they are destined for hell!

You could try to wriggle out of it by saying that Jesus was talking to his closest disciples, and they were enquiring, 'How do we know the way to the Father?'<sup>Jn 14:5</sup> but how about Peter, on the day when he (or God?) founded the church? 'Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.'<sup>Acts 4:12</sup>

These may not be Jesus' words, but this utterance was inspired: 'Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them':<sup>Ac 4:8</sup> Then again, we might have a loophole in the same verse because Peter was addressing them as 'Rulers and elders of the people!' so he was clearly wanting to rattle their cages. (Interestingly, this was when Peter and John had just healed a cripple – another outcast!)

What started this train of thought was a comment I read that 'by its very nature Christianity is exclusive', quoting Jn 14:6 and that really rattled *my* cage. Yes, I know that Jesus is unique, and I do believe that the human, Jesus Josephson, from Nazareth, is the Christ of the Universe, but I am struggling with the idea that some people are excluded simply because they belong to some other religious belief.

And I'm also worried about my own culpability in this. Has my own insistence on excluding those who don't believe what I believe actually inhibited other people, including my own family, from discovering the wonderful inclusive love of Jesus?

Answers on a postcard, please.

Paul Bev. 6.12.22

## 223 Response to my enquiry

My kind friend who likes to see that I'm not going (too far!) off beam was concerned that I might be heading towards universalism: in the end, God won't actually condemn anyone. Thankfully, I was able to fully agree with each Bible-based point he made. But there was one passage<sup>[Rom 2]</sup> that I felt I should check further – and I was quite surprised by what I found.

Our concern was what would happen – come the judgement – to those of other religions, but that passage turned out to be not about 'them' out there. Here's my precis.

Having wound them up in chapter 1 into a frenzy about the awful things that 'they' do, he now attacks the Christians in Rome with all guns blazing...

- Don't you **dare** judge others, because you do the same things they do! (1)
- If you judge others, **God will judge you!** (2,3)
- By judging others, you could be showing **contempt** for 'God's kindness, tolerance and patience'. (4)
- Your hearts are stubborn, dear Christian friends, and thus you are 'storing up God's **wrath** against yourself'. (5)
- If you, dear Christian friends, persist in doing good, you will receive eternal life, but if you follow evil, you will receive **wrath and anger** (because you should know better, I assume he means). (6-8)
- There will be **trouble and distress** if you, dear Christian friends, do evil, and **judgement** will come against you, especially if you have the advantage of being a Jew, because (I'm guessing he means) you have knowledge of the Scriptures. (9-11)

Then 12-16 seems to say that those who **don't** have the Jews' advantage of knowing the Scriptures will be judged on the basis of what they do, even though they haven't got any knowledge of the Jewish law.

In 17-24, he really lays into the Christians for **saying** that they know what God requires, and yet hypocritically not doing what they know is right.

Finally, 25-29 seems to say that their 'being religious' is just a sham if they don't live up to it. Again, it's what you actually **do** that matters, not what you say and/or how 'religious' you are.

Ouch!!

Now, part of the reason I wanted to check this passage is because it follows Romans 1, which contains verses<sup>[26,27]</sup> that some people use to support their view about gay sex, so let's check our interpretational options on this general topic:

- 1) Gay sex is an evil perversion (the traditional, 'plain reading').
- 2) Being gay is *not* evil, but Christian gay people should remain celibate.
- 3) Within a committed relationship, gay sex should not be seen as a sin.

What would the apostle say at this point, given that Christians differ in their interpretation of the Scriptures? If we're concerned about what kind of example we set to those who don't yet believe, what is the **really** important issue? I'd say it's this:

Don't you **dare** judge others with whom you disagree (whether Christian or not)!

Paul Bev. 7.12.22

## 224 Continuing discussions

(The following covers an 'obvious' point, but one that I stupidly hadn't realised – so it's probably nothing new for you.)

While discussing about the law with my kind friend,<sup>[222,223]</sup> he pointed me to Luke 16<sup>16-18</sup> where John the Baptist seemed to be doing away with the law. It's a certainly very odd passage, three verses sandwiched between two parables – marooned, even – but Jesus says,

*The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law.*

*Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

A strange mix! But it set me thinking: OK, it doesn't mean that the law was no longer needed, but we know that *something* pretty cataclysmic was happening around the time that John and Jesus did their preaching – but what? And because I tend to think in terms of overviews, looking for patterns, and wanting to see what God is doing overall, I wrote a few things down in columns – 'before' and 'after' – and it was really enlightening. I'll probably share it with you, once I've thought it through a bit more.

But with my proofreader's eye, I spotted that (in this translation, anyway) Jesus is saying that nothing will drop out of the 'Law', not out of the 'law'. Earlier, always looking for consistency, I had noticed that in my email discussions with my friend I had oscillated between 'law' and 'Law' – which should it be?!

What is it that Jesus is saying 'the least stroke of a pen' will not drop out of? In my head, it was the lowercase 'l' version – I thought he was saying that none of the laws (plural) of the Old Testament would be done away with. That had worried me as it's obvious that some laws are no longer needed – food laws, for example, and stoning disobedient children, hopefully!

No! Jesus wasn't talking about the laws; he was saying that The-Law-and-The-Prophets – in other words the Old Testament – is essential *because it points forward to him*. He came to fulfil The-Law-and-The-Prophets, and that makes much more sense to me now!

Can you see how ‘the bigger picture’ is building up here? The Old Testament is essential as it shows how God was working out his plan, starting with Abraham, to bring blessing to the whole world. Throughout the Old Testament God had placed signs of what was about to be fulfilled in Jesus – no wonder Paul and others were so excited when they discovered God’s amazing plan!

The ‘before’ and ‘after’ either side of John and Jesus was **not** that the law was abolished – and anyway remember that, for 500 years after Abraham, there was no law – so exactly what **did** change?

Back soon...

Paul Bev. 10.12.22

## 225 The history of God and the world

As I said last time,<sup>[224]</sup> I was struck by Jesus’ statement<sup>Lk 16:16</sup> that:

*The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached.*

It set me thinking about what exactly changed when Jesus and John started preaching? Why do we measure time by those events, that preaching? Why do we see it as the centrepiece of human history or, better, the centrepiece God’s history? And here are the column headings I scribbled:

|               |                 |              |                 |               |
|---------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Totally ideal | Good but flawed | 4 BC – AD 30 | Good but flawed | Totally ideal |
|---------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------|

At the time of creation, it was totally ideal, but (what? why?) the wonderful goodness of creation was marred. God’s creation is still good (God doesn’t make rubbish!), but flawed. What changed at the centrepiece? Next scribble: *Old covenant* → *New covenant Jer 31*

|               |                   |                    |                   |                  |
|---------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Totally ideal | Good but flawed   | 4 BC – AD 30       | Good but flawed   | Totally ideal    |
| <i>Gen 1</i>  | Old covenant (OT) | <i>Jer 31:31ff</i> | New covenant (NT) | <i>Rev 21/22</i> |

Right throughout history, God has made covenants with humans – relationship agreements. At creation, God came to dwell with humans – heaven came to earth – and it was ideal. Ultimately, heaven will come back to earth, and it will again be ideal.

|                  |                 |                  |                 |                  |
|------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Totally ideal    | Good but flawed | 4 BC – AD 30     | Good but flawed | Totally ideal    |
| <i>God comes</i> | God helps       | <i>God comes</i> | God helps       | <i>God comes</i> |

See how God is there the whole time, helping to gradually improve things! OK, in the OT we see how God helps sometimes by withdrawing his protective hand and allowing things to get worse. But this is always to make us see that when we trust God, have faith in God, things go well, but as soon as we say we can ‘manage without your help, thanks’, it all goes horribly wrong.

So the whole of human history is about God trying to get humans to improve, to learn, to work together, to stop beating each other up. Gradually we improve, but it’s a very long, slow business, and there’s a repeated pattern of ‘wilderness/exile’ times and ‘promised land’ times.

Can you just imagine the sense of excitement in the early church – especially Paul, with his intimate knowledge of the OT – as they saw this pattern, there in the scriptures, and realised that they were actually at the centrepiece of God’s human history – God’s kingdom has come! (Well, I’m not sure how much they realised, but they knew it was cataclysmic.)

My thinking is that for hundreds of year, the church has managed without God's help, thanks. We've turned the Good News of the Kingdom of Hope into 'You're a miserable human being, steeped in sin from birth, but if you do what we say – sorry, what the Bible teaches – you can escape this evil world and get to the loveliness of heaven'.<sup>Rev 21/2</sup> (OK, a slight overstatement.)

There is hope! There is God with us, Emmanuel!

Paul Bev. 11.12.22

## ***226 A game of two halves? No, just one single goal!***

Ignoring the World Cup for a minute, God has only ever had **one single goal**: to have a place where God and humans can enjoy being together, doing things creative together, in love.<sup>[225]</sup>

**Two halves?** Our Bibles are divided into two, but we need them both – they are complementary. We have 'Old Testament' and 'New Testament' but did you ever think why 'testament'?! A better word is probably 'covenant':

'Old Covenant' – 'New Covenant'

or better:

'Old Covenants' – 'New Covenant'

because the OT tells us about a **number** of covenants that God has made with us (a covenant is a sort of 'promise agreement'). Indeed, the OT even *includes* the new covenant – in prophetic form, of course – and Jesus came, as he said, 'to fulfil the law and the prophets', i.e. as the final fulfilment of all the old covenants, the fulfilment of all God's teaching in those covenants.<sup>[224]</sup>

A couple of years ago, I discovered a very helpful [sermon](#) by John Walton, where he explains how God used covenants, over the centuries, as teaching tools to gradually draw humans away from the view of God (or the gods) as held by the peoples of the ancient Near East – fickle and vengeful, not to be trusted. Starting with Abraham, God gradually moves us closer to knowing the real God, whom we then see in glorious technicolor in Jesus.

I was so impressed by the sermon, that I rehearsed the ideas in a couple of articles,<sup>[135,136]</sup> and I've reproduced them below (slightly edited), in case you prefer to follow up these ideas as words on a page rather than the spoken words of a YouTube sermon. (Only two articles, but that was before I went to my regime of 500-word chunks, so it's almost 2000 words, sorry.)

Alternatively, if you like cartoons, there's the Bible Project, who offer a huge range of very clever and very succinct overviews of all sorts of Bible topics and Bible books. The one on the [covenants](#) is excellent. You read the text, and it gives you a 5 min video, but be warned, it's an introductory video – there are eight in the series. Then again it's that or 2000 words of mine or a very packed 19 min sermon!

Trust me, it's a good investment.

(Today I kept it to 400 words!)

Paul Bev. 14.12.22

## 227 What a strange and amazing story!

One of my lovely friends, Jane, was asked to give a Christmas talk to a group of people from various countries around the world, of various faiths and none. What she shared was, I think, truly inspired, so I asked if I could share her ideas with you.

The thing that struck me most was how weird (in a good way!) the story is; it's totally unlike any other story in any other religious (or non-religious) context that I've ever come across.

She explained that the Bible was the story of God's love for the people of the world. It's **not** a religious rule book; rather, it's a history with two parts: The OT is the history of the creation of humankind and the beginnings of the Jewish nation, and the NT is the history of Jesus – it's **his**-story. The two parts form one continuous love story.

Jane had threaded a red ribbon through her Bible as an illustration of God's love weaving its way through the whole story. She gradually unwound the ribbon, reading various short passages.

(Aside: notice how 'promise', a.k.a. 'covenant' or 'testament', threads through the story!<sup>[225,226]</sup>)

**2000 BC** – Genesis 12:1,2 God promised Abraham that he would have descendants, and through that family, God would bring blessing to everyone on the earth. (Jesus was a direct descendant of Abraham.)

**1100 BC** – 2 Samuel 7:10-16 God promised David (Abraham's descendant) that one of his descendants would be 'king forever'.

**700 BC** – Isaiah 7:14 – A promise that a virgin would give birth to a son, and call him 'Immanuel', God with us.

Isaiah 9:6-7 – 'Unto us a child is born...' A promise of a son who would be our ruler.

Isaiah 53 – A strange-sounding prediction: a suffering servant (Jesus?) would die for his people.

**700 BC** – Micah 5:2-5 A new ruler will be born in Bethlehem (not Jerusalem).

**600 BC** – Jeremiah 33:14-26 A 'branch will sprout' from David's line (a descendant of David) who will save God's people.

(We could perhaps add Jeremiah 31:31-34, God's promise of a new 'covenant'<sup>[225]</sup> – God will forgive us and completely forget our sins.)

**500 BC** – Zechariah 9:9 A king will ride into Jerusalem on a donkey – strange!

**0 AD** - anno domini (Latin) means 'the year of our Lord'.

Luke 1:30-33 – God promises that a young girl will have a baby by the power of his Holy Spirit, and he will be called Yeshua/Joshua/Jesus – which means 'God saves'.

Matthew 2 – Magi/kings/wisemen arrive at King Herod's palace looking for the 'new king', based on astronomy and Micah's 700-year-old prophecy. The magi find Jesus and give him presents. (God invented Christmas presents!)

You can then choose how to apply any of the aspects of the story as appropriate to your hearers, maybe that the first Christmas present was God's **presence** wrapped up in the form of a human baby called Jesus... Immanuel, which means 'God with us'.

## 228 The way God works

As I've said before, I like to see patterns in things I'm studying – it helps me get my head around it, understand it and remember it, and recently I've seen a pattern in God's relationship with humankind, and I pictured it like this:<sup>[225]</sup>

|               |                   |                      |                   |                  |
|---------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Totally ideal | Good but flawed   | 4 BC – AD 30         | Good but flawed   | Totally ideal    |
| <i>Gen 1</i>  | Old covenant (OT) | <i>Jer 31:31ff</i> → | New covenant (NT) | <i>Rev 21/22</i> |

Now, whatever your view of the early chapters of Genesis, however literally or figuratively you choose to read it, I believe its main purpose is to help us understand not the 'how' but the '**why**'. God's creation is definitely good – God doesn't make rubbish – but while Genesis tells us that we got it very wrong, and still do, I can't accept that humans are in any sense fundamentally evil.

Also, any reading of Genesis can hardly avoid seeing that God's system is based on 'trust' or 'faith' – which is true of any relationship – and trust involves working with God, not on our own.

Another pattern I see is that, for God, humankind is a work in progress: from cavemen to warring tribes to (hopefully!) societies cooperating for mutual benefit. That's God's plan anyway, and although there have been many setbacks, that must be something God wants, right? And how important is that for 2023, on a global scale!

As we've rehearsed over many articles, God only ever had one plan – to bring blessing to the whole of humankind – which started ~2000 BC with Abraham. God is the ultimate entrepreneur, starting with one man, which became one community, which God wanted to be a pattern and example for the rest of the world.

But it only worked because Abraham trusted God.

And thinking about trust, I was very struck in a carol service last night by the preacher pointing out that Jesus *needed* his fellow humans; he was totally dependent on Mary and Joseph – talk about trust! God trusts **us**! We have to work with God on the overall plan to bring blessing to all of humanity. Really? Must we? Isn't it much easier just to think about 'me and my salvation', and the salvation of my family and a few friends. Why do we have to worry about the bigger picture?

Sadly, Christians *thought* they were working God's big-picture-plan in the days of the colonialist expansion of Christianity, when we imposed western patterns of worship on societies and cultures that were totally different from ours. And at the same time we took their resources.

Where is this rambling thought progression taking me?! I think it's to try to see God's big picture, which is difficult for those of us brought up with the kind of Christianity that was really just about me and my salvation, and about me getting away from this messy world to a happy heaven.

I hope some of the above makes sense to someone.

Happy Christmas!

Paul Bev. 21.12.22

## 229 Christian inoculation

What factors have inoculated your friends and family (FF) against the wonderful message of God's love in Jesus? What turns them away from taking seriously what you believe?



This week, one FF told me that in the 1950s his dad converted to Catholicism in order to marry his mum. Dad's brother, by then an anglican vicar, wrote a strong letter warning him of his error. Then when women became vicars, the uncle converted to Catholicism. Quite a strong vaccine!

While sexual abuse in the church – and the church's unwillingness to confront it – is scandalous, I don't see it as a strong vaccine because we can agree with the FF that it is terrible, and can apologise, so hopefully it won't stop them taking the gospel message seriously.

Many people I've met have been inoculated by preachers banging on about sin and hell, 'every time I go to church', as my Mum used to say. Other have been put off because churches exclude women from leadership, or refuse to remarry divorcees.

The church's attitudes to these have softened; indeed, my own interpretation of the Bible has changed on a number of issues, but one that I wonder about in today's church is what would your church say to people in long-term relationships who aren't actually married? I think the Bible is pretty clear about sex outside marriage, so if such a couple came to faith, should we insist that they get married before allowing them to take any responsibility in church?

(I wonder if you've guessed yet where this is leading.)

How many of your FF are inoculated by the church's attitude to issues of sexuality? Indeed, what *is* your church's attitude? I've spoken to many friends from different churches, and the attitudes vary widely. One said yesterday that their church welcomes gay people but won't allow them to take any up-front roles, such as being involved in service leading or welcoming.

I may have misunderstood the views of those I've spoken to, so here I just make some general statements about what churches' views might be. But remember that this isn't just an interesting theoretical discussion; *this is about the lives and emotions of real people.*

Most extreme is that gay sex is evil but that God can 'heal' people.

Others say that gay sex is just plain wrong, or maybe just not God's ideal. So it is 'sin' – but then we're all sinners.

Others might say that we've learnt that sexuality does vary and that attraction to those of the same sex is very real. Some Christians who know this attraction feel that they should stay celibate.

Some might say that 'being gay' isn't something that has any validity and that we're giving in to the pressure of the world's views.

I actually think this discussion is vital to the church's future. If you are willing to address this issue, I have already recommended David Gushee's *Changing our mind*.<sup>[216-17,219-221]</sup>

Paul Bev. 24.12.22

## **230 What is sin, anyway?**

What we have been 'discussing' (a bit of a one-sided discussion?) is the ethics of gay sex. What is your interpretation of the Bible's teaching? At the end of my previous article I offered four stances that a Bible-believing Christian might take.<sup>[229]</sup>

In the conversation I referred to, one person said that their church welcomes gay people, but those in an active gay relationship aren't allowed 'to take an up-front role'. So, they are clearly saying that being actively gay is knowingly sinning – hence their rule (I wonder how they enforce it).

Another view, which two people have expressed to me recently, is that if we back down on gay sex being a sin, where will it lead? In what other area will we allow our views to be affected by the world? Indeed, in my lifetime, some churches (not all) have changed their interpretation on women in leadership,<sup>[153,154]</sup> and on divorce and remarriage.<sup>[221,224]</sup> Where will it all end?! (Excuse me, but should fear affect our biblical interpretation?)

David Gushee (an acknowledged expert in Christian ethics) says that he has changed his view, and he sets out very carefully, quoting Greek and Hebrew, *why* he has changed. But *first* he makes clear that what matters far more is our attitude to those who hold a different view from our own – and when he went public he experienced the negative of that in full force!

One of the passages quoted to argue that gay sex is a sin is Romans 1<sup>26,27</sup>, but the main thrust of Romans 1 and 2 (or am I wrong? please check me out) is to say: Look at all the terrible sins ‘they’ commit! And then, having got his readers saying, ‘Yes, yes, terrible, isn’t it?!’, he slams into them with, ‘Therefore [which I was always taught was an important biblical word] don’t you dare judge other people, since you do the same things!’<sup>[2:1-4]</sup>

So I think Paul would say that what really matters is not the ethics of gay sex; rather, it’s our attitude to those who hold a different view.

To return to my title, what is sin anyway? To anyone *outside* the church it’s ‘doing naughty things’ or rather, ‘doing things that the church says is naughty’. And why do they think that? Maybe it’s because that’s what we *inside* the church tend to concentrate on?

But would Paul agree with that definition? I think not – and neither would Jesus, judging by his ‘discussions’ with the Pharisees. Primarily, sin is wrong attitudes of the heart – and pretty high up on Paul’s list and on Jesus’ list is ‘judging others’.

When Paul was discussing the ethics of eating food offered to idols,<sup>[1 Cor 8]</sup> his point wasn’t, ‘Is it a sin or not?’ but ‘How does my attitude and what I do affect other people in their faith?’

So how does what I think and say and do affect the lives of people whose interpretation of the Bible differs from mine?

Paul Bev. 26.12.22

## ***231 Words are powerful and potentially harmful***

In my person-to-person discussion of the ethics of gay sex the other day,<sup>[229]</sup> I said something like, ‘If you say that gay sex is evil...’ and one friend replied, ‘That’s your word, not mine.’ Sorry, that was thoughtless of me!

Words are important because they are powerful and potentially harmful.

In an email discussion, another friend referred to ‘the plain meaning of Scripture on sexual behaviour.’ So if the Bible has a set of words about something, and those words taken on their own have a ‘plain meaning’, do we just accept them at face value?

What about, ‘if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him’?<sup>1 Cor 11:14</sup> But I guess we would say that (1) it was a cultural thing and (2) it’s a one-off – there’s no other verse to support that view.

And on gay sex? (my italic) ‘Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their *perversion*.’<sup>Rom 1:27</sup> and ‘You shall not sleep with a male as one sleeps with a female; it is an *abomination*.’<sup>Lev 18:22</sup> Those words sounds pretty plain to me.

But one problem that we all face is that it's very difficult to be objective in our (translation and) interpretation of Scripture when we've always been taught that gay sex is sinful or evil – or is that *not* what you've always been taught and believed?

Words are important because they are powerful and potentially harmful.

So you share the gospel with Adam and Brian, a married couple, and they come to faith. And then maybe they (and also Clare and Diane, another couple) grow in their faith and are full of love for God in their new-found faith. Great! They are outgoing and would be great welcomers, or they are good musicians and offer to help lead worship. What is your church's policy on this, and what do we say to them?<sup>[230]</sup>

Words are important because they are powerful and potentially harmful.

If your fear is that the church is giving in to the pressure of the world, and that gay sex is indeed sinful,<sup>[229]</sup> then I guess that someone will need to make this clear to your friends A, B, C and D. And there could be serious the pastoral implications of getting them to follow your church's teaching. Would you insist that the couples should split? or become celibate? Difficult, but if that's your church's stance, maybe you need to consider it?

(If your church policy is that being gay is something that requires healing,<sup>[229]</sup> then I guess this discussion about A, B, C and D is a bit academic.)

It's not easy, but I believe that this is a very important area to think through, because it's people for whom Jesus died that we're talking about. Our attitudes to them, and what we say to them, could be crucial in their finding the life and love of Jesus.

Paul Bev. 28.12.22

## 232 Screwtape rides again

(Warning: This article is not unconnected with my recent topic, but it broadens the theme. It uses strong irony – C.S. Lewis did it first – so please don't take it as personal criticism.)

Behind all of my searching and writing is the heart-cry of 'How come the early church was so dynamic, powerful, life-changing, world-changing and yet look at us now?!' My recent studies in Revelation have reminded me that there are forces trying to screw up our witness.

I don't have 'the answer', but I think I can point to a few ploys that Screwtape's ultimate boss must have used. Here's a strong current one: Convince the enemy that what is most important is personal salvation – get away from this 'evil' world, and escape to a comfy future in heaven.

I doubt that the early church would have recognised what we now refer to as 'the gospel', and would have had questions to ask us about why we're so little involved in fighting against the corrupt and unjust systems in the world.

Obviously, Screwtape has an eye on church doctrine, trying to seed ideas that are *close* to God's ways but will, if encouraged by a bit of self-interest and power-hunger, lead off into all sorts of fruitful variations. With a bit of luck he can encourage humans to feel so strongly that **they are right** that they will begin to hate and kill (literally or metaphorically) each another.

My history knowledge is weak, but I'm sure you can think of examples through the centuries.

Then, when the Christians have challenged the political systems and are in the ascendancy, there's the technique of getting them to use that political power in all sorts of 'interesting' and 'creative' ways. Again history provides many examples. Nice one, Screwtape!

So what should Screwtape do now that Christians are fighting a rear-guard action? Fear is certainly a good emotion to feed; we won't upset anyone if we say it's just about having a personal relationship with God rather than proclaiming, 'Christ is Lord'.

Another really useful technique is to pick an ethical, personal behaviour-based issue – especially one with strong emotional overtones – and convince Christians that it's a fundamental fight for the truth of the Bible against the way of the world.

Maybe Screwtape has encouraged leading US ethicist, David Gushee, to lead us off into error, or maybe Screwtape is working on Christians' obsession (tell me I'm wrong) with sexual sin to blind us to a valid interpretation of Scripture.

Over all, Screwtape has a lot to gain from our turning this into a matter of biblical principle, rather than personal ethics. He has a sure-fire way of destroying families – especially Christian families – by creating fear, misunderstanding and prejudice. One bonus is that it can alienate Christians from a church that says they are 'welcome' and yet stops them serving. Another bonus is that it shows the church, yet again, as judgemental and out of touch with reality.

Paul Bev. 31.12.22

## 233 Mind change motivation

We've rehearsed here that thinking of repentance (metanoia) as 'feeling sorry for our sins' is a pale reflection of Jesus' saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand'.<sup>[215-219]</sup> Repentance, rather, as a fundamental change of mind.

So we have to repent (change our minds) to enter God's kingdom in the first place, but how good are Christians at changing our minds (repenting), especially publicly?

Let me give you two (well, three) real-life examples of public repentance (mind-changing).

I've mentioned<sup>[229]</sup> my friend's uncle, an Anglican vicar, who wrote a strong letter to his brother (i.e. Dad) when proto-Dad publicly converted to Catholicism in order to marry proto-Mum. Then, a number of years later, the uncle publicly converted to Catholicism because the Anglican church had allowed women to become clergy. (I count this as two examples of public repenting.)

Now, how many academics do you know of who have publicly stated that what they had been teaching for the whole of their academic lives, they now believe was in error? And I'm not thinking of scientific academics where some new experiments had given new evidence. I'm talking about a Christian academic who decided that an alternative interpretation of the Bible, which he had rejected as wrong, he now felt was a valid interpretation. That takes some guts!

You can no doubt imagine the response that David Gushee got in the USA when he published *Changing our mind* in 2014. You have to be very highly motivated to repent, publicly, like that.

I hope no-one was offended by the comments at the end of my last article<sup>[232]</sup> – none was intended. I was referring to the pain that could be caused, especially in Christian families, when family members come out as gay (but also the pain they feel *before* they come out).

It was seeing people suffer this pain that motivated David Gushee to revisit his life-long teaching of the traditional Christian teaching of gay sex as sinful; and I assume that he didn't have any 'vested interest' in his change of mind, as the internet suggests he's happily married to his wife.

I know and understand (and have in the past shared) some of the thoughts and feelings you may have on this issue, dear reader, so thank you for bearing with me. Following David Gushee, I have changed my mind, as I register that

the Bible texts have to be taken in their cultural context (the same principle that we happily apply to less contentious issues), and that the Hebrew and Greek texts have been translated by people who hold the traditional interpretation of those texts. And that's not a criticism of the translators – they have to choose (English) words for individual passages on the basis of their understanding and interpretation of the rest of Scripture.

I'm not asking that you agree with me, but simply that you accept that fellow believers see this as a valid interpretation of Scripture.

Paul Bev. 3.1.23

## 234 What is sin? Part II

In an earlier version of my last article,<sup>[233]</sup> I included a mention of another public repentance: a clergy friend of ours had an affair, and he had to resign. He stayed with his wife and they are again very happy together, but in their new town and new church, when my friend was asked to be a part of the lay ministry team, he had to publicly confess his sin at a church service.

Having left that article to marinade overnight, I realised that it didn't add anything to the article; rather, I mentioned it because I was cross that my friend had been put in that position – telling the whole church what he had done. (Actually, I'm guessing it was just as hard, if not harder, for his wife.) 'A symptom of the church's obsession with sexual sin', I was thinking. 'Would they have forced a public confession if he'd been fiddling the collection money?!'

I then started thinking again about the putative Adam and Brian,<sup>[231]</sup> a married couple – plus Clare and Diane, who share a flat – who all came to faith at an Alpha course. They grew in their faith and were keen to serve in the church.

But as I explained, in one local church here, the declared policy is that people in an active gay relationship are welcome in the church but they can't have an 'up-front role'. Think about the implications for that church if A, B, C and D had been on their Alpha course.

One interesting issue is would the church leaders have to ask Clare and Diane about 'the nature of their relationship' before allowing them to lead worship or be welcomers? Clearly, they are very good friends, but is it more than that? And for all we know, while Adam and Brian are clearly committed and loving, they may be totally celibate. Some interesting pastoral issues!

But back to my title, 'What is sin?'<sup>[230]</sup> and let's face it, we do like to know, 'Is it a sin or isn't it?' That's what, at one level, we're asking: is gay sex a sin or not?

My reaction about my clergy friend's public confession illustrates how sloppy my own thinking can be, sorry. But my friend knows he did something very wrong: he (they) jeopardised two marriages, damaging those trusting relationships – and it's relationships that really matter in life.

That situation is very different from the putative Adam and Brian. They are deeply committed, and their sexual intimacy is an expression of the love they have for one another.

But if I'm honest, I find it difficult to feel positively to the whole idea of gay sex, and so it would be all too easy for me to allow that negative *feeling* to affect my *thinking* on the issue. How can something that 'feels wrong' be right?

For the sake of our gay friends, we do need to put our feelings to one side and look clearly, carefully and biblically at this issue.

Paul Bev. 4.1.23

## 235 What is sin? Part III

A beloved friend of many years has joined in the debate and says, 'I'm really not sure what you're trying to achieve or who you're trying to convince'. Good question!

I'm not trying to convince you about, 'Is gay sex (not) a sin?' Well, I've not put forward any biblical arguments to that effect. That's not the point. If you want to engage with that issue then you could study the arguments put forward by David Gushee in *Changing our Mind*.

So what am I trying to achieve? Well, I can't do a lot, but in whatever way I can, I'm trying to stop people – especially minorities – getting hurt, feeling alienated, feeling judged, and feeling rejected, whether that's people already in the church or people who wouldn't darken the doors.

Why the title then?! Well, I'm not asking, 'Which things are sins and which aren't?' Rather I'm asking, 'What makes God cross?' and to answer that, we could ask, 'What made Jesus cross?' And you already know the answer to that! I could end the article here. (But no such luck!)

Input from another friend is to the effect that sin is what harms our relationships with one another and with God; and another friend wants (and I agree) to extend that to our relationship with the whole of creation.

But there's one problem with a definition of sin that relates it to (not) building up relationships. It's too complicated, and it can be messy and confusing. Let's face it, we prefer the security of knowing exactly what's right and what's wrong. So when someone by the name of Paul says, 'Well, it just depends on the situation, on who we're talking about, on the person's level of faith, etc, etc,' it unsettles us.

And I'm not talking about me, but my biblical namesake. Try reading 1 Cor 7 and 8 and tell me that defining sin is simple. There's stuff in there about things being right for one person and not right for others – and there's stuff about sexual passions, too. I'm sorry folks but as much as we'd like to talk about 'the plain meaning of Scripture' and 'objective truth', the Bible (certainly post-Jesus) sometimes says, 'Well, it depends on the situation'.

For example, a missionary friend raised this: If a man comes to Christ in a society where polygamy is allowed, what should he do? The 'plain meaning' of Scripture is clear. So should he divorce all but his first wife, sending the others (and their children) away? Or maybe continue to live together but only have sex with his first wife – think of the tensions that would cause!

Yes, we should take sin (relationship breaking) seriously, but let's build one another up in love and not concentrate on working out what is a sin and what isn't, and certainly not (in my personal view, anyway) on deciding whether certain people are sufficiently free of sin to do certain jobs.

Paul Bev. 5.1.23

## 236 Following in faith (not fear)

Tom Wright, in expounding Revelation 14, recounts seeing in the Middle East a trail of sheep following a shepherd. That's how it worked in Jesus' day and he says it's the same today: the sheep recognise the shepherd's voice and follow. So that's **following and trusting a person** – which seems exactly what Jesus asked of the people of his day.

I'm not saying that my church is perfect, but it's certainly different from my experience of other (evangelical) churches over the years. Our main model seems to be of everyone loving and serving each other – and I'm not talking just about the regular members.

You will find local people here who talk about 'my church' – but they rarely go! Well, maybe to the annual bereavement service or carol services or Christingles (we have to put on several each year), and of course marriages, christenings and funerals. But when the church has practical needs, they are more than happy to serve alongside us.

As an example, Sue and I run a cafe on a Tuesday morning, hosting Toddler Tunes – toys and songs for the littlies – and a group of older folk, some recently bereaved. Many of these people don't come to church services, but they love and serve each other and they **invite their friends**.

'But don't you preach the gospel?!' you ask. If people actually come into the church, isn't that a great opportunity to tell them the good news of Jesus?!

Some of them come to be married or to have their babies baptised, and the vicar makes clear what's what, I'm sure. Mine is just to relate to them personally, and we share life's ups and downs. I try to listen to God and to listen to the people I'm with, and I trust God to use me just as one small piece of 'input' into their lives, edging them closer in their relationship with God.<sup>30</sup>

This to me is the 'following' model of Rev 14 and other passages:<sup>31</sup> we follow Jesus, as disciples, with others alongside us, but on **their own terms**, not ours – disciples working with other disciples, all at different stages, all of us growing in our relationship with God.<sup>1</sup>

Contrast that with the model I've seen and used for years: We get people to come to church or to meetings and 'preach the gospel', they hopefully come to faith and then we try to get them to become disciples. And what does that 'preaching the gospel' look like? Chances are it's as per the booklet, precised below, that a friend's church has urged them to use as a Christmas effort.

I'm not saying it's perfect, but I know which model I can gladly dedicate (the rest of) my life to.

Paul Bev. 9.1.23

Precis: *The Ultimate Christmas Wishlist* Rico Tice

Chapter 1 tells the reader that 'in Jesus you get what you would really like in life', and that is: 'the hope, the peace, the purpose and the confidence that we're all searching for'. (Is that what **your** friends and family are searching for? Not mine, I don't think, but anyway...)

Chapter 2 tells them that the Gospels are 'historical biographies' containing eyewitness accounts. They tell how Jesus stilled a storm and healed people; this proves that Jesus was who he said he was – God here on earth – and this gives us **hope** in that, although life is difficult in many ways, we know that there are good things we can enjoy now and that 'even sweeter days lie ahead'.

Chapter 3 tells readers that they are living their lives on the basis of 'My life, my rules' and 'that matters to God' because those who live by their own rules, not God's rules, will be judged. 'This is what the church calls "sin".' But it's OK because Jesus died to take the punishment that we deserve (like when a cycle helmet is smashed instead of my head), so we can escape God's judgement and have **peace**.

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<sup>30</sup> I believe that, because God loves everyone, they each have a relationship of sorts with God. Mine is to help them enhance that relationship in any way I can, pointing them ever closer to a full reciprocal relationship with God.

<sup>31</sup> Wordcounts: NT (Gospels+Acts)  
follow... 155 (**110**)  
discip... 308 (294)  
lov... 323 (**100**)

And wasn't the early church referred to as 'followers of The Way'?

I'm afraid that I didn't read the final two chapters (**purpose** and **confidence**). Is it just me, or do you have F&F who would react other than negatively to this approach? Then again, I'll bet that God has already used this booklet – more than once! – to bring people to faith in Jesus. Annoyingly, God is like that!

Am I just being totally negative and biased?! This looks to me like: Start from where they are not (wanting purpose etc.), tell them the Bible is true, and this proves xyz, tell them they are basically selfish, tell them that therefore God will judge them (and send them to hell, some of them may presume), tell them that life may be a bastard at times, but 'even sweeter days lie ahead'. Am I wrong to feel so negatively towards this booklet?



## 237 Guilt by association?

My friend of many years, 'Pete', who is unhappy about my teaching about gay sex, has very helpfully focused my thinking. Pete says that it's not our place to tell people **outside** the church what's right and wrong, but **within** the church it's important for leadership to maintain sound doctrine, and (the case in point) see that sexual immorality is not condoned. He gave me various scriptures, but his key one was 1 Tim 1:10 (I'll add part of v9 – my bold):

*We also know that law is made ... for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers – and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine*

(That's the NIV, but the single Greek word translated 'perverts' is softened somewhat in other translations to 'those who practice homosexuality'. Others have 'menstealers' and 'sodomites'.)

Even people **outside** the church would agree wholeheartedly with Paul – that's a list of clearly immoral acts; indeed, they are all against UK law. Well, all except one, although until the 'swinging 60s' that was illegal too (1967). Interesting.

But in my wrestling with Scripture these past years, I have often seen that things can look very different if you pull back the focus from a single verse. This was most notable to me with Romans 1 (yes, sorry, I know I've mentioned this ad nauseam), where Paul's point – the hammer blow falling in 2:1 – is 'Don't be judgemental!' But Pete takes that point totally; he's not being judgemental at all, but is making a discernment about what he thinks the Bible actually teaches.

So broadening the focus, here is the context (vv 3-11):

3 As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may **command certain men not to teach false doctrines** any longer <sup>4</sup>nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work – which is by faith. <sup>5</sup>**The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.** <sup>6</sup>Some have wandered away from these and turned to **meaningless talk.** <sup>7</sup>They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm. <sup>8</sup>We know that **the law is good if one uses it properly.** <sup>9</sup>We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, <sup>10</sup>for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers – and for whatever else is **contrary to the sound doctrine** <sup>11</sup>**that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God,** which he entrusted to me.

*What is Paul's overall concern? What is his 'command'?* Don't allow any false doctrine.

*What is the goal of that doctrine?* Love – he wants churches to live together in loving relationship, based on 'a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith'.

*What is working against that command to love?* Meaningless talk that 'some' are engaged in.

*What are 'they' doing?* Teaching about the (Old Testament) law.

*What's wrong with that?!* The law is for pointing up wrong (see the attached list).

*So why is it wrong to discuss the law?* It's wrong if you don't *focus* your study of the law.

*Focus on what?* Focus on how the law is fulfilled by Jesus, how it shows us 'the glorious gospel' – that's the purpose of the law.

So as I see it, the whole purpose of the passage is not to determine whether a specific action is wrong. Rather, it's about living together in love and having gospel-shaped doctrine, and it's about not mishandling the law.

I'm no New Testament Greek scholar, so could someone who is, tell us how the Greek word translated 'perverts' fits into Paul's list of heinous crimes, please? Thanks.

Paul Bev. 11.1.23

## 238 *When push comes to shove*

I really didn't mean to get drawn into specific arguments about biblical interpretation,<sup>[237]</sup> but my great friend 'Pete' made it clear that gay sex is, according to the Bible, sexual immorality. The thing is, I have several Christians friends who are therefore, in Pete's view, sexually immoral – so I was pushing back, sorry. And through work, I've relatively recently met gay people in Norwich and beyond, and have discussed their relationship with church. These are real people.

In this journey, I've introduced you to some of my friends (as well as some theoretical people). There was the work colleague's uncle who, despite having castigated his brother for converting from Anglican to Catholic, some time later did the exact same thing when Anglicans began to allow women to be leaders in church.<sup>[233]</sup> He felt that he could not stay in a church that went against the Bible's clear teaching: women should not preach. (David Pawson agreed.<sup>[153,154]</sup>)

Yesterday, I learned from Pete that when he was divorced and left with two children – and he met and married someone who was also divorced with two children – they were shunned by his church (and by his family members who were part of that church) because of the Bible's clear teaching on divorce and remarriage.

In discussions with another friend,<sup>[229]</sup> I've learned that the policy of his church is that gay people are welcome to join in their church activities, but they are not allowed to have up-front ministries if they are in an active relationship.

Now, as my missionary friend said, 'If sinners are banned from leadership, I'll have to pack up and come home', so presumably this particular sin is bad enough (and it is certainly in Paul's list of heinous sins<sup>[237]</sup>) – and because they are persistently doing it – that it warrants laying down a rule. Then again, there's no rule about being persistently greedy or arrogant or selfish.

So, in each of these three cases, the church in question is saying that, on the basis of their biblical interpretation, they will not be pushed by the world's agenda into compromising their beliefs.

Sticking up for (your interpretation of) biblical standards is good, but when we get it wrong, it can cause human suffering – and I didn't even need to cite apartheid in SA and segregation in USA, both justified on biblical grounds.

If you (and your church?) think that, in all situations, gay sex is... is what? a sin? evil?<sup>[231]</sup> sexually immoral? corrupting our young people? If you are adamant that David Gushee's interpretation is wrong, what should you (your church) do?

How should you treat gay people in your church (or on your Alpha course). Yes, I know, I've heard it many times: 'Hate the sin; love the sinner', but what does that actually mean in practice?

Sorry to prolong this, but it's real, it's growing, it's serious, we need to talk about it. Getting it wrong (either way) could have serious implications.

Paul Bev. 13.1.23

## ***239 When feelings run high***

The sum of what I've been thinking and writing over these past few years is that because God **IS** relationship (God is Trinity) therefore relationships are of first importance for human beings in general and Christians in particular – relationships with God and with one another (and with creation).

In interpreting the Scriptures, I've tried to look at the way Jesus related to the (Old Testament) Scriptures and the way he related to people, and I have therefore come to the conclusion that too unbending a view of 'what the Bible teaches' is unhelpful. People are people.

But I wonder if you feel that what I've been saying about the Bible's view of sexuality is that feelings within a relationship are paramount and so, basically, if it feels good it's OK. If that's what you think, I would ask you please to go back and read what I've actually written, albeit that my views have changed with time. Better still, read what David Gushee has written.

Now, I don't enjoy talking about gay sex; I don't enjoy thinking about gay sex; I definitely don't enjoy disagreeing with some of you about gay sex, so let's see what we can agree on.

We can agree the supreme importance of human love at an individual, family and societal level, and the huge damage that can be caused when those relationships break down.

We can agree that the sexual drive in humans is very strong, and dangerous if misused. I hope we can agree too that, within a marriage, sexual intimacy can be very beautiful and can cement a relationship because of the high level of mutual trust and commitment it engenders and nurtures. It is very special and is God-given, which is partly why misusing it is so serious.

I think we can agree that society has, to its detriment, lowered its view of sex within marriage, such that sex has become a form of recreation or a commodity. (Coming from a dysfunctional family, but having got to know my sister again after decades of not bothering, I have seen first hand some of the terrible effects of that.)

We can agree that if sex is ever non-consensual or manipulative, even within marriage, it is definitely wrong (and maybe we could include manipulation by withholding sex). We're talking about some very strong feelings here, and feelings that have the potential to destroy lives, which is why we need to talk about this.

But maybe we should stop a moment to check our own feelings. What are your feelings about gay sex, especially about male gay sex? How strong are those feelings? Personally, mine were pretty negative and fairly strong, which of course made it difficult for me to look objectively at the Scriptures, but I have persisted, and I am continuing to write because I think our reaction to this whole issue could be crucial for the advancement of the kingdom.

So let's keep talking – your turn next.<sup>[240]</sup>

Paul Bev. 15.1.23

## ***240 Your turn to respond***

This is going to be a theoretical exercise, but with potentially important practical outcomes: I'd like you to think about a church (your own church, if you like) in which, following an Alpha Course or Christianity Explored, Adam, Brian, Clare and Diane, two gay couples,<sup>[231,234]</sup> have come to faith and are getting more and more involved.

The church elders, PCC or whatever are being urged by the wider church authorities to discuss the whole sexuality thing. As part of a considerable amount of discussion, over many weeks, you have before you two proposals for a statement of your church's view.

Statement A: (wording culled from an Evangelical Alliance web page<sup>32</sup>)

*We affirm that marriage is an institution created by God in which one man and one woman enter into an exclusive relationship for life. Marriage is the only form of partnership approved by God for sexual relations, and homoerotic sexual practice is incompatible with His will as revealed in Scripture.*

Statement B: (wording cobbled together by me in ten minutes)

*We affirm the special place of intimate sexual interaction within a life-long committed relationship, and we recognise the supreme importance of marriage between a man and a woman as a fundamental part of the fabric of society. However, after studying the Scriptures (including the Hebrew and Greek), we believe that there is insufficient evidence to say that, within a life-long commitment, same-sex relations are wrong – it should be a matter for the individual conscience before God. (This should be taken, please, in the broader context of <sup>12391</sup>.)*

So what the implications? You are responsible, under God, for the effects of your council's adoption of one or other statement. How will your decision be viewed by, and affect, (a) Adam, Brian, Clare and Diane, (b) the wider congregation, (c) the 98% of the local community who don't attend your church, and (d) the fabric of society in general. What are the positive and negative implications in each case?

(Not to be taken too seriously but: A response form for your own use is provided overleaf – write in red for negative and blue for positive.)

Let's keep talking.

Paul Bev. 15.1.23

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.eauk.org/resources/what-we-offer/reports/biblical-and-pastoral-responses-to-homosexuality>

| STATEMENT A                         | STATEMENT B |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>Adam, Brian, Clare and Diane</b> |             |
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| <b>Rest of the congregation</b>     |             |
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|                                     |             |
|                                     |             |
| <b>Local community</b>              |             |
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|                                     |             |
|                                     |             |
| <b>Fabric of society</b>            |             |
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## 241 False guilt can be a killer

A bereaved friend confessed to us that she felt guilty because sometimes she just can't get herself out of bed; someone comes to the door and she pretends she's not at home. 'People will think I'm a lazy so-and-so'. We tried to assure her that her feelings of guilt didn't come from God.

In the middle of the night, as I was drafting this article, Sue came downstairs in tears: thinking about her condition and her situation, she couldn't sleep: I reckoned she was feeling false guilt.

But if the Bible teaches **clearly** about something, and we go against that, then our feelings of guilt will be the Spirit's motivation to put it right: to do the right thing or to not do the wrong.

So clearly we need to know what the Bible **clearly** teaches.<sup>[242]</sup>

I think we can agree that the Bible clearly teaches that slavery is very wrong even though the Bible has no teaching against slavery; indeed, it tells us how to live *with* slavery. But we can apply general biblical principles: it's demeaning, it's degrading, it's manipulative, it's wrong.

Now sexuality can be a powerful force for good – binding couples together in lifelong union – but if misused, it can be a force for evil, so we clearly need to know what the Bible teaches.<sup>[242]</sup>

I think we can agree that pornography is wrong: it's demeaning, it's manipulative, it's degrading. The Bible teaching is clear, even though it doesn't refer to pornography specifically.

As I mentioned,<sup>[239]</sup> the Bible is clear that any non-consensual sexual activity is abuse, especially regarding children. People who have suffered such abuse often have feelings of false guilt, which can lead some to self-abuse and some even to abusing others – a destructive chain of abuse. (I've recently discovered this in my own family – amazing that I've turned out even vaguely normal!)

I think we'd agree, because of the Bible's high view of physical intimacy within marriage, that casual sex – even if consensual – is really not God's best.<sup>[239]</sup>

Should I mention masturbation? Maybe not, but this article is about guilt and there's certainly been plenty of guilt over this issue. Enough said.

To get to the point at issue: same-sex relations. Even if there were no specific biblical evidence, anything non-consensual is clearly wrong, but what about sexual intimacy within a faithful same-sex relationship? Unfortunately, the Bible doesn't draw that distinction.

What then should we say to same-sex-attracted people? Should they feel guilty for their feelings? And what about faithful same-sex couples? Should they feel guilty for their actions?

Is your church sure enough of what the Bible teaches to insist that gay sex, even within a faithful relationship, is a sin? Should they rightly feel guilty and not take positions of leadership?

Personally, I'm not confident enough in my knowledge of biblical ethics to risk laying false guilt on my brothers and sisters who are same-sex attracted.

Paul Bev. 19.1.23

## 242 Grace and truth

*For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*<sup>[John 1:17]</sup>

I wonder if you were as shocked as I was (in retrospect) to see that I had written: *I have therefore come to the conclusion that too unbending a view of 'what the Bible teaches' is unhelpful?!<sup>[239]</sup>*

In a number of recent discussions, I have quoted Jesus' response to the woman caught in adultery,<sup>[Jn 8:1-13]</sup> and I've mentioned it in several articles, I think. [Ah, yes, seven actually, sorry!] Well, here we are again, but only because a friend has just shared another aspect.

First though, to be fair to the Pharisees, they were absolutely right: adultery is a serious sin – betraying relationships – and the law does prescribe death by stoning. So they were doing their best to keep God's law, and Jesus did say 'Go and sin no more'.

But my friend writes: *There are two important lessons in that story, I think – the one that we always notice, that we are all sinners and therefore shouldn't judge one another (which you link to Romans 1-2 – good insight!). But the other lesson, which I noticed more recently, is that Jesus didn't speak to the woman until everyone else had gone, and then he could tell her to 'sin no more' (so he acknowledged that her behaviour had been sinful, and told her to repent / make a change). Sometimes we (Christians, the church) need to get out of the way, not just because we are also sinners, but so that Jesus can deal directly with someone – and then it's up to Jesus to say if that person has or hasn't been sinful, and what they may or may not need to change.*

Let's as individuals and as a church continue to strongly promote the beautiful ideal of the unique and tender life-bond of a man and a woman, but let's also recognise that we're all damaged goods, many of us come from badly broken families, and let's have the grace to allow one another to live our broken lives as best we can, starting from where we are now, today.

So please let's show grace and truth (Jesus) to Adam and Brian, to Clare and Diane,<sup>[231]</sup> and then let Jesus show them how best to spend the rest of their lives in Christ, so that we can all, together, live the rest of our lives demonstrating the grace and truth that came to us through Jesus Christ.

Paul Bev. 20.1.23

## **243 The sanctity of marriage**

My children have sometimes felt a little odd – their parents are still together! And having got in touch again with my sister these past five years, I have learnt more about my own upbringing, and have seen the terrible damage that can be caused by careless and even abusive relationships.

The sanctity of marriage has been chipped away at since 'the sexual revolution' of the sixties and, as Christians, we have rightly tried to stand against it, because the teaching of Scripture is very clear. The place of marriage in the Bible runs right through from Genesis to Revelation, in the whole of God's plan, both literally and figuratively, culminating in the wedding of the Lamb, with the church as his beautiful bride.

And yesterday we had the Church of England's pronouncement on gay marriage, which has provoked strong reactions – in both directions – which could split the church.

However, when we feel strongly about something, it's all too easy to slip into woolly thinking. We need to distinguish carefully between important biblical principles and secondary issues that could be matters of individual conscience. I feel very strongly, too, so please check me out.

I hope you won't think it trite if I summarise the issues from my recent articles in the form of a table concerning sexual relations.

Does anyone have *any* doubts about *any* of my seven symbols? The plain teaching of Scripture – the X’s are sexual immorality, and the tick is essential fundamental Christian teaching.

One dear friend, who is struggling with what I’ve been writing, has said, *‘I have searched and searched [the Scriptures] and can find nothing that suggests that same-sex relationships/ marriage are OK. A continuing theme is that God created male and female; the Bible is full of examples of the differences between men and women, something current thinking is desperately trying to negate. Jesus brought a whole new dimension to this in the way He related to women.’*

I agree totally with all of that, but does it help with my empty box 8?

Now an example from Tom Wright’s excellent *Revelation for Everyone*: When 2:12–17 mentions the evils of ‘eating food offered to idols and sexual immorality’, Tom uses it to refer to ‘faithful man-plus-woman marriage’.<sup>1</sup> Maybe gay marriage was in the forefront of Tom’s mind at the time he wrote, but it *certainly* wasn’t in John’s mind.

**Faithful** gay relations (box 8) are not referred to specifically in Scripture, so is it good biblical interpretation to just say it’s ‘sexual immorality’? For me it’s a matter of conscience.<sup>1 Cor 10</sup>

Now, think of Adam and Brian, Clare and Diane<sup>[231]</sup> – not real people, but they stand for real people around us in our churches, today. They need our love and support.

Paul Bev. 28.1.23

<sup>1</sup> From his studies of verse 14, ‘eat idol-food and indulge in sexual immorality’, Tom says, *‘Sexual morality isn’t, as is often portrayed, a matter of a few ancient rules clung to by some rather conservative persons when the rest of society has moved on. It is, rather, a matter of the call of the creator God to faithful man-plus-woman marriage, reflecting the complementarity of heaven and earth themselves. ... The reason sexual immorality is so often coupled with idolatry, as here, is because such behaviour points to different gods – the gods of blood and soil, of race and power. It’s a toxic mixture, and the Christian has no business getting involved with it, as Paul himself warned in 1 Corinthians 10.’*

I’m guessing that his discussions about gay marriage are what prompted his rhetoric about *‘a few ancient rules clung to by some rather conservative persons when the rest of society has moved on’?*

Interestingly, his quote from Paul (1 Cor 10) says that, **despite** John’s comments in Revelation, eating idol-food is **not** wrong *per se*; it’s a matter of conscience, a matter of our having a caring attitude towards people with whom we disagree – **exactly what I’m asking for re box 8!**

## **244 The pastoral implications**

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The sanctity of marriage has been chipped away at since ‘the sexual revolution’ of the sixties and, as Christians, we have rightly tried to stand against it, because the teaching of Scripture is very clear. The place of marriage in the



Bible runs right through from Genesis to Revelation, in the whole of God’s plan, both literally and figuratively, culminating in the wedding of the Lamb, with the church as his beautiful bride.

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I hope you won’t think it trite if I summarise the issues from my recent articles in the form of a table concerning sexual relations.

|                                       | male–female | same-sex |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|----------|
| with children                         | ✗           | ✗        |
| non-consensual                        | ✗           | ✗        |
| casual/unfaithful                     | ✗           | ✗        |
| within a <b>faithful relationship</b> | ✓           |          |

Does anyone have *any* doubts about *any* of my seven symbols? The plain teaching of Scripture – the X’s are sexual immorality, and the tick is essential fundamental Christian teaching.

One dear friend, who is struggling with what I’ve been writing, has said, *‘I have searched and searched [the Scriptures] and can find nothing that suggests that same-sex relationships/ marriage are OK. A continuing theme is that God created male and female; the Bible is full of examples of the differences between men and women, something current thinking is desperately trying to negate. Jesus brought a whole new dimension to this in the way He related to women.’*

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Now, think of Adam and Brian, Clare and Diane<sup>[231]</sup> – not real people, but they stand for real people around us in our churches, today. They need our love and support.

Paul Bev. 28.1.23

## 245 What most hinders the good news?

If you feel that the traditional interpretation of the Bible texts on gay sex is unarguable, that's fine: we'll just have to agree to disagree and continue to work together for God's kingdom.

Or maybe you're nervous of the strength of that interpretation and wonder if it should be left more as a matter of conscience. But are we just giving in to pressure from the world? What if we are compromising on biblical principles?!

One church that some readers will know of is so concerned about compromising on biblical principles that the vicar was involved in a campaign within the Church of England. They hold to the traditional interpretation of Scripture: women should *not* be in leadership. No compromise!

Now, we all want people to hear the good news, so what most hinders that wonderful gospel? If we are compromising on God's standards, might that be undermining the Bible, so that the good news won't be taken seriously?

On the other hand, maybe our willingness to take modern knowledge seriously and to recheck our interpretation could actually *help* the gospel. Remember, there are still churches that insist on the traditional interpretation that the earth was created in a six literal days – again, no compromise!

The difficulty is deciding where we should hold to the traditional view as the *only* interpretation and where we should accept that other Christians might hold a *different* interpretation. There is certainly room on a number of issues for two views within one church.

Getting this wrong was what made Paul so angry in Galatians. (I have just started Tom Wright's *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* for the study group I attend.) Their issue was whether, to be properly Christian, males should be circumcised. But what struck me was not the issue about interpretation, but about Peter's compromise.

God had shown Peter clearly that Gentiles were very much part of God's good news movement, and although he knew that circumcision wasn't necessary anymore, he was worried about what certain people within the church leadership would think of him, so he had Luke(?) circumcised. Thus he was going against what he actually believed, simply to avoid conflict and condemnation. Paul was angry that the Galatians' compromise was hindering the gospel.

What resonated with me from Tom Wright's comments (interesting, given what he wrote<sup>[243]</sup> in 2011 – but maybe he has now softened) was that gay Christians have felt forced to hide because of what other people in the church would think of them, and they were even worried about the way they would be treated – perhaps banned from leadership for sexual immorality.

Personally, I think we should have confidence to go back to Scripture and check out the traditional teaching about sexuality. I do not believe, in the slightest, that accepting an alternative interpretation compromises God's standards. For me, trying to insist that same-sex activity within a faithful gay relationship is immoral actually hinders the spread of the good news.

## 246 *Compromise on what?*

I think I got a little confused last time on who was compromising on what, and why Paul was getting so cross. And if you *don't* think he was cross, reread the opening chapter of Galatians, verses 6 to 9, where he refers to 'a different gospel' and then says (twice!) 'let him be eternally condemned'. He's cross!

Let me try to unconfuse myself. I said that Peter was compromising, and I think I was right. Remember that Peter was called to 'go to the Jews' and Paul to the Gentiles, but first God had to very graphically show Peter (Acts 10, 11 – two whole chapters!) that the Gentiles were very much part of God's plan – following Jesus is *not* about following the Jewish cultural pattern.

Peter's compromise was prompted by fear of certain of his Jewish (but Jesus-following) colleagues (what we now call the Judaisers). He knew they were wrong in their interpretation – Christian men *don't* have to be circumcised – but he compromised and had Gentile Luke circumcised. I think Paul probably got quite cross with Peter about his having compromised on the inclusion of non-Jews.

That's one kind of compromise, but the Judaisers were also trying to say, 'No compromise!' They felt that, by allowing men *not* to be circumcised, people were saying that upholding the standards of the law wasn't important. 'The law **is** important, it's God's law, we should obey it and not compromise!' They were rightly worried about nullifying God's Word.

But Paul was insisting that we must not **compromise on the gospel**. Yes, the gospel relies on the law in that the law points in amazingly clear ways to Jesus – i.e. Jesus fulfilled the law – but Jesus showed us that the way we interpret the law has to change.

Like Jesus, we have to interpret the law on the basis of its purpose and spirit: to help us in our relationship with God and with one another – especially the outcasts of society. As we know, Jesus didn't always obey some of the letter of the law.

When culture changes – through time and in different parts of the world – our definition of the gospel has to be flexible enough to be encultured; it has to be re-expressed to communicate well God's love to everyone in every culture, which has always been God's goal – ask Abraham!

Sure, that process isn't always easy; I've already mentioned the difficulty of going to a culture that allows polygamy.<sup>[235]</sup> However, an unbending insistence on my (our) interpretation of the law can seriously hinder the gospel.

When it comes to gay sex, I know what we've always been taught and I know how some people still **feel**, but shouldn't we rather spend time and effort promoting *faithfulness in relationships*, rather than arguing about the private actions of monogamous gay Christians? Our actions have caused them to feel excluded, and/or to compromise their belief by hiding their sexuality.

What kind of compromise makes **you** cross?

## 247 God's Big Picture – and what a picture!

Paul's teaching on the law, in places like Romans and Galatians, is notoriously complex and difficult, even when guided by Tom Wright, as our little Bible study group is. I'm certainly not claiming to have 'found the answer', but the thoughts I shared on Galatians 3 yesterday seemed to resonate with the group, so maybe they will help others.

Paul, a highly studied, highly dedicated Pharisee, wants us to see the Big Picture, in order to understand why the Kingdom of Jesus is so revolutionary, why he was willing to put up with so much (human-inflicted) suffering in sharing the good news of God's kingdom of **faith**, and why he got so cross when people in the church were returning to the security of the law (**works**).

The Big Picture starts when God creates the world and comes to live in it. Early days and it's all good, very good: Adam and Eve trust God, enjoy being with God. Then untrust enters – we begin to doubt that when God says something, it's true and good and right. *'But what if...?'* we say.

To undo the mess we've created God has a Plan and starts with Abraham, a man of trust, a man of **faith**, but the ultimate goal is the glorious restoration of the whole of creation, but that will take thousands and thousands of years. Thankfully, God sees the Big Picture.

The basis of that restoration is that God promises, and humans respond in **faith**. As Paul says, *Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'*<sup>[3:6]</sup>

Now, it will help if we can try to stop ourselves thinking of the word 'righteousness' as 'doing the right things' (**works**); it's more about 'being in a right relationship with God' (**faith**).

As Paul explains,<sup>[3:17]</sup> at 430 years into this multi-millennial project, God gives the law to this community of **faith**, as a temporary assistant (Tom translates it as a 'baby-sitter'), but Paul talks about our being 'enslaved' by the law (**works**). *Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed.*<sup>[3:23]</sup>

However, into that law, God has cunningly sowed the seed of what Jesus came to do – to bring people back to living by **faith** – and in doing so, Jesus fulfilled the law, and **faith** was revealed.

Why did Jesus get so cross with the Pharisees? After all, they (inc. Paul/Saul) were zealous to please God? Thing is, they were focused on **works** – keeping the law (and working out the minutiae of what that meant). And why was Paul even *more* cross with the Judaisers? They had *started* with **faith**, but were going *back* to **works** – keeping the law (working out the minutiae).

And today? How are we living? Are we studying our Bibles to work out how we (or they!) should behave (**works**) or are we studying our Bibles to grow closer to God through **faith**?

Paul Bev. 15.2.23

## 248 Galatians' rule, not OK

My studies in Galatians have made me feel yet more strongly about all this, especially after reading Tom Wright's commentary on Galatians 4. That's ironic, given Tom's negative comments about gay sex, within a book of 2011.<sup>[243]</sup> (But maybe he's now acknowledged David Gushee's view – I only changed my mind a couple of years ago.)

Thing is, I feel Paul's pain:<sup>[Gal 4]</sup> I've just listed eight people I have known and loved for an average of 32 years each, all of whom think (to some degree) that I'm 'barking', because I believe that covenanted gay sex should be a matter of personal conscience, not a matter of law.

But I feel *your* pain, too. I understand your concern about the ‘sexual revolution’, and I too see the destruction of family life that has resulted, but I fear that your last ditch stand against gay sex – even within gay marriage – is not helpful.

So why am I risking alienating you totally by today’s comments? Because I see a strong parallel with Galatians. No, of course I’m not putting myself on a par with Paul – despite my name.

You might have noticed my excitement over my new-found faith these past five years, as I’ve wrestled with the faith that I grew up in for 40 years and then lost totally. Well, this has now crystallised into ‘faith’ vs. ‘works’ – hence Galatians.

By ‘faith’, I (now) mean mainly trusting a Person, getting to know that Person better in any way I can. Yes, ‘the faith’ is also part of it – the essential core content of what we believe – but faith is primarily about a trusting relationship, not about a very detailed set of beliefs, some of which we might argue about (cf. church history).

And by ‘works’, I don’t just mean ‘things we do’. If it were, then how would we make sense of Jesus saying (remember the sheep and goats?) that our avoiding ‘eternal punishment’ is on the basis of ‘works’, as in ‘what we do unto others’.<sup>[Matt 25]</sup>

As Paul in Galatians makes clear, *faith* is about **promise**; *works* is about the **law**. The law – which didn’t come until 430 years *after* the promise – held us in slavery, until the promise was fulfilled in Jesus! So, from beginning to end, the whole of God’s plan was about **promise**, and the law just was an interim aid (Tom Wright’s ‘babysitter’<sup>[247]</sup>) until we came of age in Christ.

That’s why Paul got so cross with the Judaisers: they were going *back* to the law by excluding the Gentiles on the basis of circumcision. Well, not *actually* excluding: ‘Yes, the Gentiles *are* welcome in our church, but *only* if they obey the rules and submit to circumcision.’

My eight friends won’t agree, of course, but can you see the parallel? Gay people are told that unless they remain celibate they are only *sort-of* welcome – after all, how can people be welcome if they are knowingly immoral?! The Bible makes that rule *very* clear!

Paul Bev. 18.2.23

## 249 Happy 80th birthday, Sybil!

Let me introduce you to ‘Sybil’, a real lady I got to know 3/4 years ago. It’s her birthday today – a special one! I’ve sent her some flowers and some chocs, but she desperately needs your prayers.

As I’ve got to know her, she’s revealed more of her story. She’s had four men in her life, the first three relationships broke down and the fourth chap died a year or so ago, while separated by distance and by Covid.

She suffered a trauma as a 12-year-old, but her mother, herself a damaged lady, offered little or no help. Then, as Sybil was bringing up five kids on her own, her mum was a drain, not a help. That constant drain continued until she died at age 94.

There’s more I could tell you, but think of her today, please. Her kids, for the sake of their own mental health, keep their distance these days, and won’t be recognising her birthday (though they might surprise her and me). Her world revolves around her dog, a lovely lady who brings her dog food, and me and another lady whom she talks to on the phone.

Yesterday, the dog had an operation, and it’s not looking good – he’s old, anyway. I have to ring her today to find out if he survived the night. Happy birthday, Sybil! Life is a bastard sometimes. [He died on her birthday morning!]

Forget the theoretical discussion about the Bible, do we have anything to offer Sybil?

We do, but how we interpret the Bible is very, very important to Sybil. She doesn't know that, of course, as her experiences of church and Christians haven't been good over the years. She realises I'm not condemning her, but... well, you know how (the traditional interpretation of) the gospel comes across: you're a sinner, and until you acknowledge that, you can't experience God's love.

I think I might possibly(!) have mentioned John 8's 'the woman caught in adultery' before, but something else occurred to me this morning. Yes, Jesus' prime teaching point is against being judgemental: 'Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone!' But hang on, *Jesus was without sin*, so why didn't he stone her? We agree that the law condemns adultery, but the law does say we should stone people who transgress.

The response I've had to my mentioning John 8 as a warning against literalism has been that Jesus did say 'Go and sin no more!' To that, I've pointed out<sup>[242]</sup> that he waited until she was *alone*. And he didn't say 'Don't **commit adultery**' but 'Don't **sin** again', where sin – I would claim – is whatever harms relationships.

The trouble is, we like to know where we stand. We don't like all this wishy-washy stuff about 'what harms relationships'. But Jesus interpreted the OT on the basis of relationships, and so must we.

To get ahead of me and find out why Jesus didn't stone her, you could check out Greg Boyd's *Cross Vision*.<sup>[124–136]</sup>

Paul Bev. 21.2.23

## 250 The Galatians show us the way (not)

(God has continued to help me see how the modern-day church can become more like the New Testament church. Luvvit!)

As Paul has talked about the law, and got so cross with the Galatians, I've seen it in perspective by revisiting my 'History of the world in 500 words'.<sup>[145]</sup> I've seen again the **seismic** change that occurred in Paul's lifetime and how stupid it is, having seen it, to go back to the law to define your life and identity.

Here's the broad picture, in note form, which has helped me to (a) understand Paul's complex arguments and so (b) avoid making the same stupid mistake as the Galatians:

**2000 BC** – Abraham receives the promise of blessing and life – **for the whole world!**

100 years – Family grows in that blessing, but then famine strikes!

400 years – Slavery in Egypt before...

**RELEASE! – Exodus**

40 years – Grumbling against God

**1500 BC** – Law ('introduced 430 years later') given as Tom Wright's interim 'babysitter'<sup>[247]</sup>

1500 years – In and out of exile, looking back to **exodus** (good idea), **identity in the law** (not a good idea)

~350 years judges

~500 years kings (good and bad) + prophets

~250 years exile (in and out) + prophets

~400 years – SILENCE

**0 BC/AD** – God comes to his people

Current **identity** = family, traditions, the law, the coming Messiah (to defeat the Romans?!)

**30 AD** – Death of God + Resurrection of God, New Covenant, release from law (babysitter)

**RELEASE! – New Exodus**

New exodus, new covenant, new life, **new identity = LOVE**, not FEAR  
God is relationship: Father – Son – Holy Spirit  
Jesus is Lord (so Caesar isn't!), no FEAR ('perfect love casts out all fear')

“And so they lived happily ever after...”? Sadly, no. Even as early as...

**50 AD** – “You have to **also** obey the law and be circumcised”

As Galatians shows, all too easily we decide: “This freedom/love stuff is nice but we need to specify things more carefully.” e.g. Circumcision.

2000 years – (on and off) Ruled by **fear**, not love. :-)

The long-term questions that I've been asking these past few years are – for me, anyway – made sense of when I see this principle worked out time and again in the church.

The long-term questions that I've been asking these past few years are – for me, anyway – made sense of when I see this principle worked out time and again in **me**.<sup>[0]</sup>

From the best of motives, (I/the Judaisers/the church) have worked out 'exactly what's right', so that 'people don't go into error'.

Good motive, but what happened to **Exodus? Freedom? a loving relationship with God?**

Why, oh why, have I alienated so many people in my life by insisting on 'exactly what's right'?

Why, oh why, has the church alienated so many people by insisting on 'exactly what's right'?

And once again, the church is going to split: we're causing each other pain, by insisting on 'exactly what's right'.

**Fear** causes pain.

**Love** transforms pain.

Paul Bev. 28.2.23

## **251 Journeying... how (not) to get lost**

As Christians we're on a journey (the early church was known as 'The way'), and so we need a map to guide us. It's OK, we have the Bible! We read it, apply it, and never get lost. Yeh, right!

Did Jesus tell people they needed a map? He was immersed in the Jewish Scriptures, and he would certainly have known the teachings of the Pharisees, but he tended to say, 'You have heard it said... but **I** say to you...' Sounds like he was claiming to **be** the map: 'I am the way.'

So the people had a *law*-based map, but Jesus was advocating a *person*-based map.

Jesus told the Pharisees off, good and proper, because they even **added to** the law, creating fear-laden burdens. We can *see* that's wrong.

Did the early church have a map? Well, they had the Jewish Scriptures, and you can certainly sense their excitement, starting from the two on the Emmaus road: ‘Didn’t our heart burn within us as he opened the Scriptures?!’ Jesus had come to **fulfil** the law. Hallelujah!

The law’s purpose was to point to Jesus, and to be a *temporary* guide<sup>[250]</sup> but they now had a *person-based* map for their journey – Jesus.

All OK now? No! Galatians shows how quickly you can get the map upside down. Paul told the Galatians that they were lost (‘you wit-less lot!’) because the Judaisers had told them that, yes, Jesus is the way, but you **also** still need this bit of the law (circumcision).

Jesus taught (and modelled) that you interpret the law (see how it applies today) according to how it affects our relationships with one another and with God – a person-based map. We no longer keep *every* injunction of the law – and we certainly don’t (well, we shouldn’t) load fear on people for not sticking to our (my? the church’s?) interpretation of the law. So where we differ, we must still love and accept one another.

And remember that we’re currently using a (translation of a) 2000-year-old map, so we need to take very great care how we read it and interpret it. As I’ve said before, in those 2000 years, God has enabled us to learn more about the world in general and the human condition in particular, and so we have (sometimes dramatically) changed our interpretation. Thank God!

Also, I’ve reminded us that language changes. For example, if we were to study *only* the AV translation, we would soon get very lost, by ignoring (a) 300+ years of biblical scholarship, (b) the huge changes in the meaning of (English) words. Yet there are people still in our churches who quote AV verses (out of context) to try to tell us the(ir) way to go.

Is your map person-based, or is it law-based? Is it based on faith (trust) or is it based on fear? If you are insisting that your particular interpretation is right, how is that interpretation affecting other people?

Paul Bev. 5.3.23

## 252 Why do we need a new earth?

One thought that has kept coming back to me is: why were the first Christians so excited; why were they willing to *die* for what they believed? Like many of you, probably, I was excited when I first came to faith, and while that excitement has returned on occasion, would I *really* be willing to go through all that my namesake went through? Honestly?!

Today’s trickle of excitement started when the vicar asked (*vis-à-vis* Nicodemus), ‘What question would *you* like to ask Jesus?’, and one chap in our group asked, ‘Why do we need a new earth?’ Interesting! He explained: his home group are studying Acts: Jesus was taken *up* to heaven (ch. 1) and then fire came *down* from heaven (ch. 2). (At least we now know *where* heaven is – up there, ‘away beyond the blue’. Sure?) Somehow, he said, the discussion got to Revelation 21: ‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...’

His perfectly logical thinking went: as heaven is going to be so wonderful (Rev 22), why do we need a new *earth*? (And by my logic, would it be big enough for the billions of believers?) His honest expression is what many of us may well feel; and to be fair, his wife has died recently.

What then do we, as Christians, have to offer people ‘out there’? If we believe in Jesus, although this life is pretty crap at times, at least we know that we’ll get away from it to a better life *up* in heaven: ‘There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’



Wrong, wrong, wrong! Totally unbiblical! Is that *really* all we have to offer to those around us who are suffering in so many awful ways? No it's not – read your Bible and you'll soon see.

I'm a words man, so I opened my electronic Bible and looked through from Matthew to Revelation for the word 'heaven'. It was a real eyeopener. Try it.

[Warning: word count limit approaching!] OK, but I can give you a feel: (1) 'heaven-and-earth' is a very strong theme – almost an entity. (2) It's all very much NOW. They were excited because heaven had come to earth NOW, in the present. The idea of 'Tolerate this crap now because it'll be OK in heaven!' would have been total anathema to the early Christians. (3) Even *before* Jesus had died and risen, he was saying about the kingdom of heaven being *near you, in you*; and 'Thy kingdom come ... on earth...'

(If you want to get ahead of me, I talked about these biblical ideas in Dec 2020,<sup>[136]</sup> having heard a sermon by John Walton, an OT scholar who reckons that any sermon based on the OT **must** include Revelation.)

OK, I'm not quite ready for martyrdom yet, but I *am* excited!

[To be continued...]

Paul Bev. 8.3.23

## 253 A totally different perspective

Is the OT still a bit of a problem for you? Do you feel you have to cherry-pick the 'nice' bits? Or are you positively excited by it? (The early church only had the OT and they were EXCITED!)<sup>34</sup>

Let's look at the wonderful pattern of God's plan – Genesis to Revelation – of which we're part.

God created the world as a place to be with people – as a 'temple' where his presence would dwell. Heaven on earth! (Gen 1 – see JW's book.<sup>33</sup>)

We said, 'Yes but...', and our doubt caused God to withdraw his presence (Gen 3).

(Not quite sure how Noah fits the pattern, but he did trust God in difficult circumstances, and God did make a covenant with him. Gen 6ff.)

Humans, at Babel, decided to 'make a name for ourselves' by building a tower up to heaven – to bring God down (Gen 11). Er, no!

Abraham trusted God, who made a covenant with him: through him the whole of humankind would be blessed and God would dwell with them. He took Abraham on a journey (Gen 12).

When things went wrong and God's people ended up in slavery, God's presence was with them, and through Moses, God brought them out – miraculously – with his presence in the pillars of cloud and fire. He took them on a journey.

As they journeyed, God's presence was with them in the tabernacle.

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<sup>34</sup> The best helps I've found for the OT are Boyd's *Cross Vision* <sup>[124–129]</sup> and Walton's *Lost World of Genesis One*. <sup>[130–133]</sup>

Eventually they reached the promised land and entered it, but not without incident: they tried to take matters into their own hands, rather than trusting God to drive out the inhabitants – but that’s another story – ask Boyd.<sup>34</sup>

‘Build me a temple, and my presence will come and dwell in it,’ God promised them.

For a few hundred years, people trusted (then didn’t trust) God, so God kept withdrawing his protecting presence. But God promised them a new Exodus, a new covenant, ready for...

God’s presence came to earth in **human** form. But he died and went away. Then he came back at the resurrection. Then he went away again back to heaven.

When God’s presence came back to earth in what seemed like flames of fire, heaven came to earth, and they declared the praises of God in the many languages – the reverse of Babel.

As the new believers looked into the OT, they saw this glorious panorama, the pattern of God’s coming to bring his presence to his people. God took them (us) on a journey: The Way.

God is still true to his promise for his presence coming into his temple: **WE** are the temple, both as individuals and as a local church and as a worldwide church – the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Now God doesn’t take *away* all suffering, but God’s presence is in that suffering with us which can transform our journey, bringing good out of evil.

And that same pattern will continue right to the culmination – the new heaven-and-earth – where there is no temple because God’s presence IS the temple.<sup>Rev 21,22</sup>

Now do you see why I’m so excited again?!

(This is a cut-down version of <sup>[136]</sup> and [Walton’s sermon](#).)

Paul Bev. 9.3.23

## 254 Change? – When? Where? How?

My starting premise today is that the Bible is the inspired word of God; it was given to help people of every age to live and behave in a more God-like way. But because even the most recent writings are almost 2000 years old – when the world was a *very* different place – it’s sometimes difficult to know how God can best use the Bible to inspire us to live in 2023.

Thankfully, in addition to the words of the Bible, albeit written in languages that few of us understand, we have the Holy Spirit, who inspires individual believers – and groups of believers (churches) – to study those words, translate them into languages that we do understand, and then we can make ethical decisions on how best to live.

Fine, but because the world is changing (faster now than ever?), churches do have to change their minds sometimes, and that can be painful, can cause disagreement, and can even split the church. So is it ever right to take the plain meaning of Scripture, plus the church’s accepted teaching, and say, ‘Actually we now think that teaching is wrong; we need to change’?

When churches are inflexible, unwilling to be humble and say, ‘Actually, we got it wrong,’ we end up hurting one another and – far, far worse – hurting people **outside** the church, for whose benefit, I hope we agree, the church exists.

For example, given that the plain meaning of Scripture sees nothing wrong with slavery – indeed, it teaches people how to live in a slavery-based system – how did the church change its mind? They started with the overall teaching of the Bible to treat one another with respect and dignity and care (especially those on the margins). Then they gave

special weight to the sayings and teachings of Jesus, and the way he related to the Old Testament. Then they looked at the cross and saw Jesus' self-giving, self-sacrificing example.

Result? They agreed that, despite the plain meaning of Scripture, slavery is evil.

And what happens when situations come along that didn't apply in Bible days? How do we know what Jesus would do if he were alive today? Exactly as I just outlined. We ask the Holy Spirit to inspire us as we think through the issues, look at the situation, look at things we now understand (that were not known and would have been meaningless to the Bible writers), compare that with the words of Scripture and make a decision – sometimes to change, sometimes not to change.

What will stop our churches splitting? We need to think the issues through carefully, but we need to respect one another's views. We may need to agree to disagree, allowing each other to hold different views, without looking down on one another.

But does the teaching of the churches ever (rightly) change? My current read, Andrew Davison's *Amazing Love*, mentions the major changes made on celibacy, contraception and women's ministry and, as you probably guessed, then tackles the issue of gay marriage.

Paul Bev. 16.3.23

## **255 More and more militant!**

When I came downstairs this morning, I remembered happily my articles about heaven-and-earth,<sup>[252,253]</sup> which were positive and encouraging, and hoped to continue along positive lines, but I thought I'd have a time of silent prayer first – this is what came instead, not so positive, sorry.

I won't claim 'God guided me'; it was probably just my obsession, but I started wondering what people 'out there' feel about the current discussions on gay marriage. From the final chapter of *Amazing Love*, I gathered that the vast majority of people in the UK, especially those under 35, are either ambivalent and can't understand what all the fuss is about, or are unhappy at the our discriminatory stance.

So I see the spectrum (I like spectra) as from militantly anti-gay-marriage to militantly pro, with most people somewhere in the middle. Then I added a dimension to my spectrum: people *inside/outside* the church. And my next dimension was *age range*. Finally *gender*. According to the last chapter of the book (I doubt you'll be surprised), the stats show overwhelmingly that the militant anti end of the spectrum is: inside church / over 55 / male.

Certainly, of the eight folks who challenge what I'm writing,<sup>[248]</sup> all are over 55, and only two are female – anecdotal, and inadmissible as evidence, I know.

And who runs the church? Primarily men over 55 – while congregations are generally weighted towards women – anecdotal, and inadmissible, I know.

Please could I ask those of you who are anti-gay-marriage, what is your motive? I assume you're concerned to uphold biblical truth, maybe wanting to assert the importance of family life, which is so much under pressure – great! Perhaps you're concerned about the spiritual lives of gay people – being constantly sexually immoral doesn't help one's eternal salvation, I guess.

Maybe it's that if we condone sexual immorality, the younger generation will be drawn in? One vicar I know vaguely (not one of my eight, but male, around 55) wrote to his congregation, claiming that those who support gay marriage 'are idolising self-fulfilment through sexual desire' and he wonders, 'what other forms of sexual relationship ... will be accepted next?'

Having started as ambivalent, I'm now militantly pro-gay-marriage – but only committed, covenantal gay relationships. Why? (I'll explain here, but see also my next article.<sup>[256]</sup>)

My prime concern is that the vast majority of people in the UK should know the love that God has for them, and I err on the side of being concerned for people under 35; and they tend to be people who either think it's a non-issue or who think that the church is actively (unlawfully?) discriminatory, and they would never darken our doors.

Secondly, I'm concerned about gay people, especially gay Christians, who feel... well, you can imagine how they feel: some have even committed suicide.

When I see loving gay couples who have stuck together despite all that society (and especially the church) throws at them, I want to celebrate their love – I do celebrate their love.

Paul Bev. (male, over 55) 17.3.23

## 256 Facing reality

Remember my new friend, Sybil?<sup>[249]</sup> She has been pretty desperate in our last two phone calls, talking about 'no point in carrying on'. At the heart of the terrible reality of her life is broken and abusive relationships in her family, down through the generations, sometimes including misuse of one of God's most beautiful (I think) gifts, sex, thus causing psychological damage.

By contrast, the reality that Sue and I are facing is a medical one, Alzheimer's, and our response is to accept the reality of the situation and spend more time together, making the most of the opportunities we do have. We feel very privileged in all that we have going for us, and we feel physically much closer than ever.

Another sad reality is the continuing increase of marriage breakup – how many families do *you* know who *don't* have children split between parents? The improvements in contraception and the 1960s 'sexual revolution' have allowed us to see sex as a form of recreation, as a commodity, and, within marriage, maybe as a right (usually a man saying that?). So a God-given gift which, within a committed relationship, is a beautiful and powerful force for good, can end up destroying relationships. Ask Sybil!

So, as Christians, we want to stand against that low view of sex and to encourage our young people to see it as something very, very special, to be held for committed relationships. But again, being realistic, we don't want to heap guilt on them if they haven't kept to that high view.

And being realistic about divorce, how should we apply biblical principles? Thankfully (in my view), the churches are easing off on their policies of not re-marrying divorcees. Yes, we know from the Bible – from Jesus' own teaching – what the ideal is, but how can we be realistic and apply the biblical principles to the situation we are in today?

My final reality check is that some people have same-sex attraction as part of their natural make-up. Thankfully, through our increased understanding of the physical and psychological roots of human sexuality, we no longer see being gay as a mental disorder (yes, it was on the WHO list as a mental disorder until the 1990s!) or as a personal choice (though some religious groups don't accept the scientific evidence). So how can gay Christians apply biblical principles to the reality of their situation? And how can the church as a whole help?

The idea of a monogamous gay relationship (marriage) is something that didn't exist in Bible days, so that makes applying biblical principles more tricky. But then the church has had to develop a policy on other science-affected issues, such as contraception.

Personally, I would encourage the same relationship-affirming ideal for all of us: either celibacy or holding sexual intimacy for a committed, monogamous relationship. So I would totally support a change in church policy towards gay marriage,<sup>[255]</sup> as a way to face the reality of same-sex attraction, and to celebrate faithful relationships as the core of our society.

Paul Bev. 21.3.23

## 257 An ongoing learning situation

As a child grows, it learns – new experiences, new situations. As parents, we seek to care for our children by teaching (and modelling!) the principles of caring, sharing, loving and giving. But we do have to enforce some ‘because I say so’ specifics – early days: fire, roads, strangers; and later: time-keeping, alcohol, sex, drugs. As the child’s understanding grows, there’s less need for specific rules, but it’s always a difficult balance. Who would be a parent, eh?!

But what must it be like for God?! Let’s see *you* start with a bunch of kill-or-be-killed cave-dwellers, for whom the gods are angry and capricious, needing (human) sacrifices to mollify them. Then see if *you* can guide us as our world knowledge increases.

It seems God has worked mainly through exemplars. God found a teachable, trusting individual (Abra[ha]m) and formed a people-group (Israel) whom he sought to guide, so that they could be exemplar to the rest of humanity: ‘Through you all the peoples of the world will be blessed.’

But this was largely as precursor to actually coming as an individual human exemplar. Then, through Jesus’ resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit, God was able to create a worldwide exemplar, The Way. (I’m not saying ‘the church’ – too much baggage in that word.)

And the Bible? God inspired its writers to provide a written source to show us those principles, the spirit, the movement, the change and the embetterment of humanity that was possible if we (in due course) were to follow The Way of Jesus, through the transforming power of the cross.

Yes, the Bible carries specific rules that would help specific people at specific times – such as ‘Don’t eat shellfish!’, sensible advice with no refrigeration. But with some issues, the prohibition might be lifted, ‘as the child grew older’, i.e. as human knowledge increased.

Given God’s overall plan of improving the way humans live together, through love, care, respect etc., it seems truly amazing that it wasn’t until the early *19th century* that the inhumane practice of slavery started to be abolished.

And we could say the same about the treatment of women, or of beating children. Why does it take so long for God to change people’s minds?

I think it’s our fear of change, our fear of admitting that our assumptions were wrong in the past. It’s fear of accepting that some of the specific prohibitions might contradict the overall principles of The Way. But which specifics is it right to release?

Back to the awful history of the church. It’s been a constant battle, as (our interpretations of) specific Bible teachings have had to change, and people have fought (sometimes literally) to avoid change – or fought to encourage change!

Move too fast and you let those ‘evil liberals’ sweep away the Bible’s teaching, or drag your feet and you allow those ‘evil conservatives’ to bring the church into disrepute.

We have to change, but how soon, and on which specifics? Difficult! But very, very important!!

Paul Bev. 30.3.23

## 258 *One single simple issue*

I went for a walk-and-a-coffee with one of my eight friends who challenge what I'm writing.<sup>[248]</sup> I studiously avoided 'that subject', but just as I was thinking it was time to go home for lunch, he asked, 'Do you want to see what I said I'd been studying?'

His email had said that he'd linked the Greek Septuagint of the Leviticus passage with Paul's neologism, *arsenokoitai*, in 1 Cor 6:9 and, to be fair, I could see exactly what he was saying. I don't know any Greek, but I could plainly see that the string of Greek letters in the Septuagint looked remarkably similar to *arsenokoitai*.

For my friend, there's just *one single simple issue*: men having sex with men. Is it right or is it wrong? I had to agree: Paul clearly and unequivocally says it's wrong. 'That's the apostolic teaching,' he said, 'so we have to accept it as the truth.'

Aside: I checked 1 Cor 6:9 in my 1980s NIV, and the word is translated '*homosexual offenders*'. To compare some different translations, I looked online and found that the NIV translation has, at some stage, been **changed** to '*men who have sex with men*'!

This is more evidence for another thing I've been saying: if we want to know 'what the Bible teaches', we are in the hands of the translators. What **we** read has been translated according to **their** theological views (that's not a criticism; that's what they have to do). So, in the 1980s, 'homosexual offenders' was considered the best translation.

To return to my theme, for me there's *one single* not-so-*simple* (but very real-life) *issue*. In terms of sexual ethics, the most important issue to get across, say to young people, is that sex is not just a way to make babies, not just something enjoyable; it's a very special intimate action between two people that can seal the bond of their (hopefully lifelong) commitment to one another.

The Bible principle to emphasise is: sexual relationships are for lifelong, monogamous marriage.

Now, Cathy is a real-life church leader who is gay. She met Sally and they fell in love. What should they have done?

View 1: Gay sex is wrong; the Bible teaches it clearly; reject that and you're rejecting the apostolic teaching; you're therefore effectively rejecting the Bible.

*Knowing how strong sexual temptation is, we advise you to break off that relationship. It would be very difficult being near each other and not falling into sin. Clearly, celibacy is God's calling for you (and all gay Christians).*

View 2: Given our increased knowledge of human sexuality, some Christians feel that Paul's prohibition was one of those biblical specifics,<sup>[257]</sup> where the wider biblical injunctions for care, faithfulness, mutual support etc. take precedence.

*While accepting that some Christians might disagree with you and judge you (cf. 1 Cor 9), marry and be a witness to all around you – including (especially?) other gay people – of God's love.*

## 259 Guidance for gay Christians

Sally and Cathy (not their real names) are real people,<sup>[258]</sup> but as the Bible has little to say about female gay sex, let's move to hypothetical people, Ian and Mike, who are also gay, and are strong Christians. Like Sally, Mike is a leader within their church. They have fallen in love and want to get married, but because of their love for God and their belief in chastity before marriage, they have remained celibate.

They go to their vicar and explain that they want to get married and would she conduct a service of blessing, please? But Rev. Jane<sup>35</sup> is a traditionalist (View 1, last time<sup>[258]</sup>) and here is her reply.

*Sorry Ian. Sorry, Mike, but Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 6:9 is very clear: he lists 'men who have sex with men' alongside prostitutes and adulterers. That's the apostolic teaching; for gay Christians, any thought of consummating your love would be sin – plain and simple.*

*We love you very much and you're still very much part of our fellowship, but sin is sin. So I'm afraid that if you marry, we can't allow you to continue in your leadership role, Mike.*

*It's really tough, I know, but God expects us to be prepared to suffer for the sake of the Gospel. You can remain friends, of course, but you must remain celibate. And so it wouldn't be good for you to live together, would it? As Paul goes on to say, 'Flee from sexual immorality. ... Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.'<sup>[1Cor 6:18,19]</sup> A very serious matter, you see!*

As one of my questioning friends just emailed, 'Where do you draw the line?' Where indeed? That's what I'm asking: can lines move? They do; should this one?

But the implication behind his question (from our previous discussions) was, 'If we give in to the pressure on *this* issue, what will we be pressurised into next?' Or as the vicar I quoted said,<sup>[255]</sup> 'what other forms of sexual relationship ... will be accepted next?'

But fear of the future must not blind us to this pressing issue in the present. We must focus on what our interpretation of the Bible enables us to say **now** about **this** one single (not) simple issue. Should our view change, in the light of modern science?

For me, the issue is debatable, and should be up to individual conscience. So, if you want to hold the traditional view, you need to be very sure of your ground. (1) It has serious emotional and spiritual consequences for gay people such as Mike; (2) it is likely to split the church; (3) people outside the church – gay or not – may struggle to take Jesus' message of love seriously if we say that their married gay friends are sexually immoral.

Are you sure enough that you are right?!

Paul Bev. 5.4.23

## 260 Constant Bible-inspired change

Or: *Constant Jesus-inspired change*

A common comment is, 'If God is all-loving and all-powerful, why doesn't he...?' The difficulty of being all-loving is that love doesn't force or coerce. Love works *with* the beloved. And, let's face it, God has a difficult job with us. But God has a plan.

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<sup>35</sup> I hope you will forgive the irony of setting the vicar as a lady because 30 years ago she would not have been allowed to be a vicar!

Yes, I've been over the 'starting with Abra[ha]m' bit repeatedly but we need to remember that all the Bible characters (and writers) had an imperfect view of God, and yet God still used them and inspired their writing. When Jesus comes, we can finally *see* what God is like, but the NT writers still didn't have a perfect view of God – they too were fallible, yet God inspired their writing.

Despite having 'seen' Jesus, *we're* not perfect, so what must *we* do? Change. And that, for me, is what this is all about – constant change. A loving God wants things to be better tomorrow than they are today. So God inspired the fallible Bible-writers to give us texts that could inspire us towards change.

But as I'm sure you've noticed, in many church circles, 'change' is a dirty word. Both churches and individuals see it as their God-given duty to preserve The Truth, as contained in the Bible. Yes, at times, Christians have fought *against* what the church then believed (think: Reformation), but rather more often it has fought *against* change!

So I think God wants *Jesus-inspired* change. If someone wants to change something, check it out against what you know of Jesus. And if someone wants NOT to change something, ditto.

Because of our reluctance to change, it took centuries to get rid of slavery; and while Jesus made many counter-cultural moves to improve the treatment of women, it took centuries for women to begin to take their rightful place in church and society – and there are lots of other positive Bible-inspired (Jesus-inspired) changes we could name.

Wanting to make things better tomorrow than they are today, God has also inspired people to learn more about how the world works. But, as believers, we have to check the new ideas, as they might challenge what the Bible teaches, so we must check with what we know of Jesus.

Now, a growing number of Christians, noting what we're learning about human sexuality, are questioning the NT writers' attitude towards gay sexuality. So check it with what we know of Jesus. I think his priority would be: what enhances the lives of individuals; how can individuals know and experience the love of God?

Anyone wanting NOT to change our understanding of gay sex, has to justify, as I explained,<sup>[259]</sup> pushing gay people away from the message of Jesus, pushing your average non-churched person away from the message of Jesus, and potentially splitting the church – a big responsibility!

Can we not let individuals like me and Sue (i.e. not just gay Christians) follow our consciences? That would mean we could let gay people in to the joy and sanctity of marriage. Not a big ask.

Paul Bev. 6.4.23

## **261 Feedback – minor or major issue?**

I've had feedback recently from six of the eight friends unhappy to sanction gay marriage, and it has come into clearer focus now.

For me, the issue is: should gay Christians be allowed to follow their conscience and consummate their love for one another? Something private and personal – a relatively minor issue.

But I think my eight friends want to insist that *any* kind of gay sex is definitely wrong, per se. To deny that is a challenge to the Bible. This, for them, makes it such a major issue that some Anglican churches are talking about not paying their dues to the diocese, and even considering separating from the church.

Anyway, to feedback. One friend writes,

*I have read Amazing Love and lots of other pro-gay 'marriage' material and am not convinced.*



As I said, I don't feel the need to convince anyone that gay marriage is 'right', just that it should be up to individuals, and not be dictated by the church hierarchy. It seems more akin to the issue of eating food offered to idols.<sup>[1 Cor 9]</sup> Paul says it's not wrong per se, but a matter of how it might affect fellow believers – and we are affecting gay Christians big time!

Re <sup>[259]</sup> ... *Where is the line to be drawn then and whose line is it, mine or God's?  
Why is it that we are being expected to affirm something that for thousands of years has been seen as wrong?*

Just because a view has been accepted for thousands of years doesn't make it true and immutable. God has gradually got us to change our minds about a number of things over the centuries, most notably slavery, and about women being seen as subordinate. Those changes of mind on specifics are because they go against broader biblical principles, as demonstrated in the life, teaching and example of Jesus.

Who draws the line? We do! God expects *us* to decide, as individuals and as churches. God sets the general principles; we decide on the detail. Yes, it would be much simpler to just say, 'The Bible says such and such, and that decides it', but issues are rarely that simple, and circumstances and cultures change. Sorry, but we have to take responsibility, and we are answerable to God for our decisions. (And there are some very big decisions in the air, as above.)

*[let's not go on arguing because] there are many more issues that the church, at a local level, needs to be discussing and taking a stand on, rather than just caving into the increasingly anti-Christian culture of today's society.*

I'll leave that comment for you to think about, but gay marriage *must* be a pretty major issue if churches are willing to split over it.

More importantly, how do under-55 non-churchgoers (including my own family) view this? You can *say*, loud and long, 'love the sinner, hate the sin', but what they *see* is a church that condemns a person just for being gay; and they now see one half of the church condemning the other half for not maintaining the truth of the Bible.

This is the reality, folks! And if you don't believe me, ask any non-churchgoing under-55. Remember, if our attitudes are hindering the gospel, we're answerable to God.

Paul Bev. 8.4.23

## **262 Put it to the test**

One friend has said that the largest church in Norwich is full of young people, and yet they hold to the traditionalist view: 'Gay sex is not God-honouring or in any way acceptable to God.'

It's absolutely brilliant that those young people have discovered how passionately God loves them, but my main concern is for the 99% of their contemporaries who haven't a clue, and who are being led along by the materialistic, image-obsessed, personality-dominated culture that surrounds them.

OK, so why don't we put this to the test? I know it's totally unscientific and anecdotal, but let's find out what some non-churchgoers actually think. I've spoken to the over-55 non-churchgoing husband of a keen Christian, and to an under-55 male member of my family. I told them about what was happening in the church today on this issue, and let's just say they expressed negative sentiments about it, the under-55 being the more outspoken.

'Objection M'lord! The counsel is leading the witness.'

Fair enough, so why don't those of you who want to maintain the traditionalist view ask someone? You could express it something like this (do you think it's a fair way to put it?):

1a) Some churches take the line that the Bible teaching is clear, which is that gay sex is not acceptable to God, and so people in an active gay relationship aren't allowed to take leadership responsibilities in their churches.

1b) Other churches believe that, in the light of our increased understanding of human sexuality, Christians should be allowed to follow their consciences. If they feel that the cultural norms of New Testament times might now be outweighed by the wider principles of love, care, faithfulness etc., then it is OK for them to form a life-long commitment to the one they love and then to consummate that love within a marriage bond.

Let your non-churchgoer tell you what they think about those. Then maybe add this:

2) A few churches are considering withholding funds from their central church organisation and are also talking about splitting their church away from the main church structure.

It will be fascinating to hear what they have to say. Do please let us all know. Thanks.

Paul Bev. 9.4.23

## **263 A total revelation!**

How lovely to be talking about something positive again – an utter joy. Thank you, Lord.

So, Happy Easter everyone, joy abounds in me again! Why? I've just seen something totally wonderful that I've never noticed before.

Regular readers will know that I keep banging on about: 'How come the early church totally exploded, spreading like wildfire?' and 'Why is it not like that now?'

I think 'fear' is the key: I've just scanned the New Testament for the words 'fear' and 'afraid':

- fear is most frequently *contrasted* with faith (i.e. do **not** fear, only believe)
- when people meet angels or see God at work in powerful ways: 'Do **not** fear!'
- fear of what other people will think (i.e. *don't* do that)
- people described as 'God-fearing' (a neutral term?)

Almost nowhere does Jesus tell us to fear God,<sup>36</sup> and almost nowhere in the rest of the New Testament is the idea of fearing God commended.<sup>37</sup>

So to whom was the New Testament first addressed? People then lived in fear of the Romans, and they also lived in fear of the Scribes and Pharisees, who were constantly saying God that would throw them into hell if they didn't obey the rules.

Now do you see why the good news was such... well... **Good News?!**

Here's the clearest statement: '*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*'<sup>[1 Jn 4:18]</sup>

***Absolutely brilliant good news!***

<sup>36</sup> In Lk 5:12 Jesus says, 'fear him', but I think it's said ironically, as it's followed by the command 'do **not** be afraid'.

<sup>37</sup> The only exceptions I saw were: 1 Pet 2:17, Phil 2:12, and a real 'sore thumb', Heb 10:26-31, plus the strange Acts 5 incident of Ananias and Sapphira.

So what's the situation today? The church holds the key to eternal life and to God's no-fear love, so how do we communicate that love? (1) We *show* them real love by caring for them, but (2) because we think that people won't appreciate the good news, we first tell them the bad news. OK, modern preachers don't bang on the pulpit and shout (out of context), 'The wages of sin is death!' – but talk about Jekyll and Hyde!

My main concern is the impression that organised Christian religion gives to the 99% of unchurched young people:<sup>[262]</sup>

- We know what's right and what's wrong (judgemental)
- 'People today' are wrong, very wrong (judgemental)
- God frowns in anger when he sees what you're doing (judgemental)
- But Jesus loves you! Honest! And he died for you.

OK, I may be overstating it, but can you see any similarity with Jesus' day? Today, people are living in fear of all sorts of things – global warming, wars, lack of income, broken relationships – and what we offer them is a judgemental religion that adds more fear.

And to add to the mix, let's shout loudly about gay sex being wrong. And let's split the church; then people will see what we think is *really* important.

Now can you see why (a) I'm so unhappy with the church I was brought up in (indoctrinated by) (b) *I'm so excited once again?!*

Praise God for his wonderful love for all!

Paul Bev. 10.4.23

## 264 Two types of knowledge?

One of my friends with whom I have lively discussions has pointed out that there are two types of knowledge: objective and subjective. Only God has objective knowledge, and if we humans set ourselves up as some sort of authority, saying we can make our own rules, that leads to Godless chaos – a bit like we have at the moment.

Yes, I agree: only God has objective knowledge; humans don't. The trouble is that what applies to 'them' also applies to 'us': not even Christians can know things objectively, only subjectively. How could it be otherwise, given our first premise?

'Yes, but we have the Bible, and that's God's Word,' you might reply, 'so we know the truth objectively.' Really? I thought only God could know things objectively? Does the Bible deliver objective truth?

As I have said many times, yes, God *inspired* fallible humans in their writing of the Scriptures, to point us in the right direction, first towards Jesus (OT) and second, in Jesus, to know what God is really like. But, in my view at least, it doesn't give us objective rules that apply for all time.

In any case, having thought further about this, I would challenge the statement that there are (only) two types of knowledge. Isn't there a third type: knowing a person? So, for me, being a Christian is seeking to follow, emulate, copy, get to know better – and worship – a Person. And that causes a change in how we (seek to) live our lives.

Again, for me, the Bible is not a book to tell me (objectively?) what's right and wrong; rather it's a way (through the work of the Holy Spirit) to make me, day by day, more like Jesus, so that I *want* to do the right things.

Reality check: What is your main concern? Is it that even Christians are not following the behaviour laid down in the Bible? Are you concerned that some Christians (e.g. me!) are advocating behaviours that are simply wrong, and that the standards of God's Word are being set aside because of the pressure of 'the world'?

If so, you are claiming that there are certain things that you *know* are (objectively?) wrong. And when those Christians (e.g. me) suggest that broader Jesus-like concerns can take precedence over certain 'rules' in the Bible, we are just plain (objectively) wrong.

You say you fear that what I'm espousing is humanism and that bringing humanism into church would make me a false prophet. Please rest easy: I still believe as strongly as ever – indeed, more strongly – the central doctrines of the traditional Christian faith; I just can't objectively prove a single one of them!

I have spent 50 years trying to prove God to friends and family and to prove certain doctrines to fellow Christians. I no longer feel any need to prove anything to anyone; I'll do the living and loving and let God do the proving.

Paul Bev. 14.4.23

## 265 Arguing past each other

When our son Tim was doing A-level philosophy, I remember how impressed his teacher was: when Tim was arguing in favour of some moral or ethical principle, you couldn't tell whether that was what he *actually* believed, or whether he thought the opposite. That ability to understand and appreciate the other person's views is very important – something I'm clearly not good at.

Tim is not a churchgoer, but I have chatted to him a fair bit, having begun to change my mind on the gay sex issue. Yesterday, I had a particularly frustrating discussion with a friend and, when Tim rang later, I poured out my frustration. Thankfully, he could see it from my friend's perspective and explained why we were arguing past each other.

What I was trying to concentrate on was the plight of gay Christians, and I was trying to argue that... well, you know what I've been saying! But my friend kept saying that if we give in to gay Christians and allow them to marry, then we're opening the door to all sorts of other things. So I kept saying, 'Please stop throwing in all these other issues; I just want us to focus on this one issue: can gay Christians not be allowed to follow their consciences?!'

I just couldn't see why he wouldn't take a more generous attitude to gay Christians, given the terrible struggles that many have had/still have. To me that seemed un-Christlike. Grrr!

Tim pointed out that what I was saying was an *irrelevant argument*, a total red herring. Their argument starts from the basic principle that any gay behaviour is deviant; they see that as a biblical principle. That is what the Bible teaches, full stop, so there simply is no point in talking about what gay Christians should do – they shouldn't! That established, let's talk pastorally.

Tim's understanding was really helpful. Clearly my friends and I have nothing to discuss, and I see now why they think badly of me: I am arguing against a fundamental biblical principle that man and woman were created complementary (which I very much agree with, by the way) and *therefore* any kind of gay sexuality is wrong. So, yes, I am a false prophet. Even by saying that gay Christians should be allowed to go with their consciences, I am saying that bad is good.

So we'll have to agree to disagree – albeit very strongly.

Ironically, my argument that, 'We've changed our minds on women in leadership, so why not on gay marriage?', isn't helping. I've checked with three of my friends, and they all said that, based on the biblical principle of complementarity, women should *not* lead churches; preach and pastor, yes, but not lead – that's man's calling. And

one pointed out that if men had lived up to their God-given responsibility to lead, we wouldn't be in half the mess we're in now.

So let's agree to disagree, and continue to spread the love of Jesus wherever and whenever.

Paul Bev. 16.4.23

## **266 Where is your BUT?**

Granted that we all want our friends and families (F&F) to know the love of God in Christ Jesus, how do we present that message? Yes, I know, the fundamental start point is to love and serve them – to *show* them that love – but if they are to come to faith then at some point we will need to (or ask someone else to) articulate the good news of what Jesus has done for them.

So let me give you the core of two outline models of the gospel and see how you react to them. But remember that the way we see and feel about God will determine how we present the gospel.

Model A: God is righteous and pure; we are sinners, separated from God; BUT God is also love; SO Jesus died on the cross to end that separation and bring us back to God.

Model B: God loves us, accepts us and offers us life; BUT sin is a fatal disease; SO Jesus died on the cross in our place to heal that disease and bring us back to God.

It might be helpful to stop now and think about those two; mull them over; maybe lay them before the Lord?

OK, so how did you react? Which of those two – if fleshed out and made less theological – would your F&F be able to relate to? (e.g. ‘None of us is perfect, and you only have to look around to see the evil that comes when people allow that disease to take hold of them.’)

Which of those two sounds more like the God as revealed in Scripture? And, more importantly, which of those two is more like the God revealed in Jesus (in the Scriptures)? For example, which of those two is more like the Hosea-God of the OT; and which is more like the prodigal Father; or the profligate farmer, chucking his seed willy-nilly; or Jesus when faced with the woman caught in adultery: ‘Neither do I condemn you!’

Looking back over the past 10/12 years, I can see that it’s Model A that I had been basing my life on when I lost my faith totally and when I tried to rebuild it. And it’s Model B that I have gloriously discovered of late and which has transformed my faith totally.

What was it about Model A that I reacted against? When I started to write, I thought it was penal substitution that was the culprit – and I looked at other ways of seeing God’s salvific work in Christ, which helped. But actually the problem goes much deeper.

Model A is based on the view of God as a righteous judge – who is also loving, and so God finds a way to set things right.

Model B<sup>38</sup> is based on the definition: God *is* love – who is also righteous, and so God will do whatever it takes to set things right for each of us.

A subtle but very important difference, in my view.

Paul Bev. 18.4.23

## 267 Please break free!

Have you had a chance to think about my two models?<sup>[266]</sup> I framed them for explaining, ‘what the gospel is all about’, but we could say it’s ‘what God is all about’. It started as:

*Model A: God is righteous and pure; we are sinners, separated from God; BUT God is also love; SO Jesus died on the cross to end that separation and bring us back to God.*

*Model B: God loves us, accepts us and offers us life; BUT sin is a fatal disease;<sup>[266]</sup> SO Jesus died on the cross in our place to heal that disease and bring us back to God.*

And we could condense it right down to:

*Model A: God is a **righteous judge** (who is also loving) and God finds a way to set things right.*

*Model B: God is **love** (and is also righteous) and so God does **whatever it takes** to set things right **for each of us**.*

In the early days of my writing odyssey, I discussed ‘the gospel’ with two rather conservative Christian friends,<sup>[73,74]</sup> and I realised that penal substitution (PS) was why I had felt *so* unhappy in my faith – Model A in spades. One friend did admit that PS was ‘pastorally inappropriate, to say the least’ for certain people (e.g. those who were/are abused, like Sybil<sup>[249,256]</sup>).

I’m now moving towards the idea that PS is just a *symptom of a deeper problem*: the Model A view of God is *fundamentally wrong* because it’s **not** how Jesus portrays his heavenly Father.

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<sup>38</sup> If you want to think through salvation as healing, try *Healing the Gospel* by Derek Flood.

Jesus met lots of people, right? And the Gospel writers, after years of mulling it all over, selected certain incidents that they thought would best tell us what Jesus stood for, right?

The first three that came to my mind were the woman caught in adultery (a), the woman at the well (w) and Zacchaeus (z). All are Model B, through and through. The very fact that he talked to them, despite their being outcasts, shows love and acceptance: none would have felt condemned, especially (a), 'I do not condemn you'; (w) was offered living water; and for (z) it was '**today** salvation has come to this house' (even before Jesus had died).

We don't know whether woman (a) followed Jesus' urging to 'leave your life of sin', but if she realised that God really *was* like Jesus, and not the Pharisee-God, she'd have been powerfully motivated – by love. For (w) the result was a powerful calling to evangelism. And for (z) it was a conviction of sin (but as a *response* to God's love), leading to a powerfully changed lifestyle.

God sets things right for each individual, as Jesus shows them God's love and acceptance; should we not do the same for our friends and family?!

But what have we **always** been taught?! 'We must preach the gospel, i.e. you're a sinner, separated from God, but God loves you and Jesus died for you.' No! We've been indoctrinated! Please break free! Change to Model B!

Paul Bev. 21.4.23

## **268 What is your priority, relationships or behaviour?**

I thought I was being quite radical in my last two articles,<sup>[266,267]</sup> but no-one has reacted, so far. After all, I was saying that churches (well, the evangelical churches that I have experience of) are presenting the gospel – and portraying God – in a way that is contrary to what Jesus preached and what the early church preached. As a reminder, here is a brief summary of my two models:

*Model A: God is a **righteous judge** (who is also loving) and God provides a mechanism to set things right.*

*Model B: God is **love** (and is also righteous) and so God does **whatever it takes** to set things right for each of us.*

The first model is a crime-and-punishment paradigm, while the second is sickness-and-healing. I scanned right through the Gospels the other day, and I cannot see anything in Jesus' words or actions to support Model A. (And I can find nowhere in the NT where we're told to fear God.<sup>[263]</sup>)

The other strand of my thinking (cycling 1000 miles round and round the same roads does give me *lots* of thinking time!) is that Model A is much more about 'sin as wrong behaviour', while Model B lends itself to seeing sin as broken relationships.

Am I wrong to prioritise relationships over behaviour? Wasn't it the Pharisees who talked loud and long about behaviour?!

And what is people's greatest need today – especially young people? It's to be loved and accepted; they need to find a community where they can belong. That's what Model B offers.

In my view, this is a fundamental mistake that the church is making, and is why we're only reaching a teeny, tiny proportion of young people. But one specific outworking of this error is the current debacle over gay marriage.

Some church leaders are so convinced that this specific *behaviour* is a sin that they are willing:

- (a) to split the church, forcing agonising decisions for those who disagree with their view
- (b) to force gay Christians into agonising decisions (celibacy vs. knowing intimate personal love)
- (c) to cause non-churchgoers to feel negative towards the church – sometimes *very* negative!

I hope those leaders are absolutely certain, before God, that their biblical theology on this specific behaviour is correct, given the potential relationship damage it will cause!

And to end on a personal note, I'm actually talking about the church where Sue and I worshipped for 37 years, and where we brought up our (now non-churchgoing) family.

Thankfully, we left on practical, non-theological grounds, having moved house, but ironically, I was on the PCC when we set up the person-specification for the new vicar, and agreed that:

(a) we would not accept applications from women and (b) the new vicar must hold penal substitution as central to his life and ministry – definitely Model A! In my defence, at the time, I hadn't a clue what penal substitution was.

Your sad friend,

Paul Bev. 23.4.23

## 269 An uphill battle

I'm pleased to report that someone has engaged with me on my Model A/B analysis.<sup>[266ff]</sup> 'Stan' is a college friend to whom I mentioned my 'coming out' about gay marriage,<sup>[268]</sup> and he has read various of my articles. Thanks, Stan!

His question is: can we not have both Model A and Model B, given that God is too big to only understand in one way? Fair point. And he quotes Romans 5:6-11, saying of it that it's 'quite clear what Paul believed'.

Glossing over my concerns that *anything* Paul writes could be said to be 'quite clear', let's note that the passage is primarily about God's incredible love and the wonderful way that Jesus rescues us. However, it does contain the phrase, 'saved from God's wrath', which sounds a bit Model A.

I don't want to argue about the meaning of individual verses, but if you read that passage with Model B eyes, it can certainly be seen as God's amazing healing of our sin. So then we have to ask: What does God feel wrathful about? Is it wrath against us? I don't believe Jesus felt wrath towards anyone – well, maybe the Pharisees.

No, just as I feel a certain amount of wrath towards Alzheimer's, so God feels a *lot* of wrath against sin and the suffering it causes.

Sorry, Stan, but I have come to believe that Model A simply does not fit as a description of the Jesus-God. Unfortunately, we have all been taught that Model A is THE way God saves us. So, having had that view drummed into us for decades (the church has had it for centuries – even the Reformation didn't erase it), it's very difficult *not* to read every passage, and see Model A in it.

As an illustration of how we tend to see what we *expect to see* in the Scriptures – and I'm certainly not saying Stan is like this – one vicar, who says that (not just Model A but) penal substitution is THE way God saves us, offered to lend me a book that shows that penal substitution can be seen in 'every single book of the Bible'.

So, I've got an uphill battle if I'm trying to persuade people to fight against the indoctrination we've all experienced, and that God really *is* like Jesus, the friend of sinner, the eternal healer.

And of course the other uphill battle is to persuade ourselves that the gospel is *not* about 'me and my salvation'. The real good news is that Jesus is Lord, and that means that our task is not just to get saved and lead a good life, but to fight against sin and sickness and injustice (just like the God of the Old Testament told us we should), and that takes guts.

If the passage you're reading paints a picture of God that's *not* like Jesus-God, then you are misinterpreting what it says. (I think the technical term is 'a Jesus hermeneutic'.)



## 270 *I'm not ashamed of the gospel, but...*

At last, I've got back to Romans, with Tom Wright. Today's passage includes, 'I'm not ashamed of the gospel...'<sup>[1:16]</sup> and Tom says that, sadly, we **are** often ashamed of it because 'it is so often mocked, sneered at and dismissed in newspapers, and on the radio and TV.'

My first reaction was to agree: how often on 'Midsomer Murders' is there a character portrayed as a bigoted Christian, telling people they are awful sinners and that God condemns them... and they probably turn out to be the murderer!

But wait, the logic is wrong. Tom says that *the gospel* is mocked. But they haven't a clue what the gospel actually *is*, so how can they be mocking it?! No, it's Christians that they are mocking, but not without reason, sadly. They may know that Christians do some good works, but they mainly think of Christians who go around, à la Midsomer Murders, condemning people.

But Tom then adds that this 'is just what is wanted by the triumphalist secular world around us.' Really? Why would 'the triumphalist secular world' (whatever that is) want to attack Christians? I know that Richard Dawkins wants to rubbish Christianity, but most people just think we're irrelevant. So, given that Christians are a tiny minority, we need to have the humility to admit that we're simply no longer relevant to most people.

What I've gained most from my 5/6-year journey is that I no longer feel any need to justify what I believe – to anyone. I really am **not** ashamed of the gospel. That's because, for me, gone is the Model A God who demands that *someone* needs to be punished, even if the claim is that Jesus accepted the punishment. That's not the kind of God that Jesus shows us.

The gospel for me is that when Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead, he defeated the satan, and cancelled the power of sin and death. Nevertheless, sin is still real in the here and now, but by the Holy Spirit's power we can overcome it. And the ascension sets Jesus as Lord of the universe, so our job – again by the power of the Holy Spirit – is to work to establish that kingdom 'on earth as it is in heaven'. That's *really* good news!

So the gospel I'm not ashamed of is a love-centred, non-penal, non-fear-based.

Let me echo John again. 'There is **NO FEAR** in love. But perfect love **drives out fear**, because **fear has to do with punishment**. The one who fears is **not made perfect in love**.'<sup>[1 Jn 4:18]</sup>

Any 'gospel' where the motivation is fear of God's wrath, is simply a non-gospel. But sadly, that's the 'gospel' that we've always been taught – it's incredibly difficult to change one's mind!

(If you feel you'd like to check this out, then try *Healing the Gospel* by Derek Flood, and learn the difference between retributive justice and restorative justice.)

## 271 *All about change*

**Does God ever change?** No, I hope not! But no, the Bible says not.

**Does our view of God ever change?** Individually, yes, I hope so. One important (hopefully continuing) aspect of that change is repentance (metanoia) – changing direction to face God.

**But does humankind’s view of God ever change?** I sincerely hope so, otherwise we’d still be making sacrifices in order to placate the divine – ask Abraham. He trusted God enough to be willing to change his view. To do that, he had to be willing to travel.

**Does the Bible ever change?** Nope, the Hebrew and Greek texts are still the same as they ever were; no change for almost 2000 years.

**Do our translations of the Bible ever change?** Yes, of course. Language changes over time, and if we want to understand what God is saying to us through the Bible today, translations have to use words that (try to) convey God’s intended meaning. (Ouch! I cringed slightly when I wrote those last words. Would you want the responsibility of being a translator? They have to try to make the words – English, say – ‘convey God’s intended meaning’!)

But translations also change because of years of research. That could be archaeology, but also research into contemporary Hebrew and Greek texts to help us understand better what the original authors might have meant when they chose to use particular words.

**Does our understanding of the Bible ever change?** Yes, definitely, though maybe not in major ways – the majority of the meaning is clear – but the research above has sometimes changed our understanding. And increasing scientific knowledge can prompt us to change, too – so some passages that we once read as *literal* truth, we might now see as conveying truth, but in a more metaphorical way.

**Do the churches’ beliefs, as based on biblical texts, ever change?** Yes, definitely. Sometimes in small ways, but sometimes more decisively, e.g. at the Reformation.

**Do different churches agree on (the rate of) these changes?** No, of course not! (Where were you during the church history classes?!)

Where is all this leading, you may ask? Well, in my articles, I’ve frequently been challenging my own (and, by implication, your) views on ‘what the Bible teaches’. Through my journeying, the changes in my own biblical understanding have totally transformed my life – and Sue’s life – and that proves... absolutely NOTHING! But I’m hoping that it might encourage some of you to have the bravery (faith? trust in God?) to also be willing to change your minds – and some of you already have, I know.

The most transformative change for me is in how I now see God: What is God like, and how does God view us? (Model A vs Model B<sup>[266ff]</sup>) This is crucial: misreading someone’s motives and intentions can really mess up your relationship with them.

Paul Bev. 1.5.23

## **272 The bad news: The Romans Trap**

(N.B. My views here are disputed by ‘Ian’<sup>[276]</sup> and I accept I’m probably overstating it here.)

I spotted The Trap as long ago as Dec 2018,<sup>[18]</sup> when grappling with God’s wrath. Then it came up again<sup>[57]</sup> when thinking about ‘justification by faith’. I started to search for other mentions of The Trap<sup>[70,72,99...]</sup> but there were too many! Clearly, I’m totally obsessed by it.

Why can’t I shut up and leave it alone? Because it’s *fundamental* to why I was so unhappy with my faith for 50 years, and why I’m so happy now.

I had this nagging feeling that faith was about loving relationship, but no! As we've *always been taught*, it's about crime and punishment (Model A<sup>[266ff]</sup>) – or do you want to tell me I'm wrong?

OK, try this. What is God's wrath about? What is judgment about? What is hell about? What is justification about (letting me off, even though I've done wrong)? **All about punishment.**

So what is Romans all about? I think it's Paul trying to tell the believers-in-Jesus (BIJs) in Rome that the gospel is about loving trust (a.k.a. faith); it's **not about crime and punishment!**

How loudly do I have to say it? (But that doesn't mean I'm right!)

Then again, if I am right, it makes a massive difference to our outlook on life, especially to our unbelieving family and friends.

The Romans Trap? In chapter 1, Paul lists a string of obviously evil, God-rejecting crimes, thereby rabble-rousing the BIJs into saying, 'Yes, yes! Hoorah! God is going to punish those terrible people in the final judgment.' Then Paul utters that fateful word, 'Therefore'...

To whom is Romans written? To unbelievers? No! It's written to BIJs. And so, what do we do with it? We pull out various verses (as detailed<sup>[70,72]</sup>) to prove to *unbelievers* that they stand under the *condemnation* of God. **Crime and punishment.**

This came powerfully back me when I re-read Romans 2:1-11 – I think we've all totally misread it. Here's the passage in the NIV, and my question is: Who is the 'you', in this passage?

1. You[BIJs], therefore, have no excuse, you[BIJs] who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you[BIJs] judge the other, you[BIJs] are condemning yourself[BIJs], because you[BIJs] who pass judgment do the same things.

2 Now we know that God's judgment against those[**them!**] who do such things is based on truth.

3 So when you[BIJ], a mere man, pass judgment on **them** and yet do the same things, do you[BIJs] think you[BIJs] will **escape God's judgment**?

4 Or do you[BIJs] show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realising that God's kindness *leads you[BIJs] towards repentance*?

**5 But because of your[BIJs] stubbornness and your[BIJs] unrepentant heart, you[BIJs] are storing up wrath against yourself[BIJs] for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.**

Who is Paul saying will suffer wrath? Is it those who do the Romans 1 stuff? No, it's religious people (like me for 50 years) who turn God's *love and acceptance* into God's *wrath and indignation* against unbelievers.

Check your favourite commentary on Rom 2:1-11, but I'm afraid that Tom Wright says of this passage that 'Paul outlines his picture of the final day of judgment', and says that, 'those who live in the dehumanising ways described in the previous passages<sup>[1:18-32]</sup> are courting disaster'.

We are taking what Paul says to *judgmental Christians* ('you are facing God's wrath') and apply it to *people who do evil things* ('they are facing God's wrath'). A total misreading of the passage! (Please tell me if I'm wrong.)

I think it's time that you and I did a bit of repenting, as Paul suggests, lest we face God's wrath for continuing to misrepresent God's love and acceptance of unbelievers (Model B) as God's condemnation (Model A).

## 273 Seeing with fresh eyes

My friend, 'Keith', who always has helpful feedback, said something that I found really challenging. Last time,<sup>[272]</sup> I claimed that God's wrath was towards people (e.g. us) 'who turn God's *love and acceptance* into God's *wrath and indignation* against unbelievers'.

Referring to John 3:17ff, Keith said, '*Jesus talks about condemnation of unbelievers, does he not? For me, that sounds like the wrath of Romans.*' That got me worried. Pretty plain, isn't it? Jesus says there that '*whoever does not believe stands condemned already.*' Ouch!

Maybe I should check the meaning of the Greek word for 'condemned' – perhaps it's not quite that blunt? But then I remembered: check the context!

So who is Jesus talking to? Nicodemus, a Pharisee. Now that totally changes the perspective. The Pharisees know all about condemnation – it's a result of not obeying the rules, right?! So what does Jesus say to a condemnation-oriented person?

For God **did not** send his Son into the world to **condemn** the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him **is not condemned...** (*then to the earlier quote*)

So Jesus is saying, to a Pharisee, that condemnation is **not** about whether you come up to God's (or the Pharisees') standards; it's about trusting in Jesus.

'But', says Jesus, looking lovingly into Nicodemus' eyes, 'if you don't believe in me, **you stand condemned already** because I'm God's Son.' (To be fair, I think that Nicodemus did come to Jesus with an open mind.)

I'm absolutely not saying anything against Keith, but please read again what he wrote, '*Jesus talks about condemnation of unbelievers*' and '*that sounds like wrath*'. Keith is viewing that passage with eyes that have been trained (as we all have!) to *expect* to see crime, punishment, wrath, etc.

If only we could train ourselves to view every Bible passage through eyes that see God's supreme desire to love and accept us, and God's willingness to do whatever it takes to draw us back into that loving relationship. But it's so difficult to change the habit of a lifetime!

My other interaction this week was with a neighbour, 'Sally', in her mid 50s, who has been very helpful since Sue was diagnosed; Sally had looked after her mum, with Alzheimer's. She invited us for tea and cake, and we sat and chatted for over two hours, including about spiritual things. I'd describe her as spiritually aware, but she has very little knowledge of the Christian faith.

Her brother has started to go to church, and when he visited recently, he told Sally that gay sex is a sin, an idea that she just could not understand. I tried to explain why 'some Christians' believed that, but I reassured her that we both think that God is more concerned for people to live in loving relationships – which makes us happier and more rounded members of the community – rather than about how individuals expressed their love.

I'm just saying.

Paul Bev. 6.5.23

## 274 The death of a salesman

I've always been a salesman, right from childhood (maybe a touch nefarious in those days), finding things that were good, and persuading others to buy them – or to buy into my ideas. My very first article<sup>[0]</sup> lists the latter [and their targets]:

- Christian faith generally [friends and family] 2/3 years
- conservative evangelical faith [charismatics, who are unbiblical] ~12 years
- charismatic faith [conservative evangelicals, who are unbiblical!] ~12 years
- Christian faith generally [contacts through business, via email] ~12 years
- (non-selling period, while in a sect) ~5 years
- (non-selling period, back at church, but not happy) ~5 years
- God's amazing love [anyone who will listen] ~6 years

And for you, my dear article-reading friends, I've been refusing to accept 'what I've always been taught', and gone back to 'What does the Bible actually say?' My target today is 'evangelism' (was that a groan I heard at the back there?!), but 'evangelism' isn't in the Bible, only 'evangelist' (×3):

OED: *A person who seeks to convert others to the Christian faith, especially by public preaching.*

- 1) 'Philip the **evangelist**, one of the Seven'.<sup>[Ac 21:8]</sup> The Seven were chosen as being 'full of the Holy Spirit'<sup>[Ac 6:1-5]</sup> and their job was to 'wait on tables'!
- 2) It's in the list of gifts.<sup>[Eph 4:11ff]</sup> And those gifts are for what? Persuading unbelievers? No! 'to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up'.
- 3) Paul told Timothy to 'do the work of an **evangelist**'.<sup>[2Tim 4:5]</sup> Why? To persuade people? Probably not, since he was the leader of a church.

[Penny drop] It sounds as if our persuader-evangelist isn't actually a biblical idea! Maybe the evangelist was simply someone good at narrating the story of Jesus (the evangel, the gospel, the good news), hence the 'four evangelists'. (Remember, they had no New Testaments then.)

This line of thinking started with 'Keith'<sup>[273]</sup> saying that 'love and acceptance' was important, but don't we need a bit of God's wrath, too? After all, what if they say they are, on balance, 'happy as I am' and maybe don't even believe in God? How do we persuade them?

As someone who has spent his life trying (albeit with some success) to **persuade** unbelievers, maybe that's not what God wants us to do. Certainly, I now try to offer what people truly need: love and acceptance, community, belonging, inclusion. I don't try to justify my beliefs, but 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have... but with gentleness and respect.'<sup>[1 Pet 3:15f]</sup>

Paul Bev. 8.5.23

P.S. Not wanting to be rude or to upset anyone, but in my experience the people who are by far the most difficult to persuade are people like me – I spent the best part of fifty years certain that I was right!

## 275 Preaching(?) the good news

I think we established last time<sup>[274]</sup> that ‘evangelism’<sup>39</sup> is a (relatively) modern and unbiblical concept, but ‘Brian’ responded, ‘Yes, but we’re definitely told to preach the gospel.’ OK, but what does ‘preach’ mean? Words change their meaning over the years; here’s OED:

- Deliver a sermon or religious address to an assembled group of people, typically in church*  
 – Publicly proclaim or teach (a religious message or belief)  
 – Earnestly advocate (a belief or course of action)  
 – Give moral advice to someone in a pompously self-righteous way

Should we all deliver sermons, or publicly proclaim?! Here’s a quick summary of ‘preach’:

Matthew/Mark say Jesus ‘preached repentance’ (metanoia, mind-changing, rethinking).

Luke (for Gentiles, cf. Mt/Mk for Jews) has Jesus ‘preaching the gospel (of the kingdom)’.

(Interestingly, John has no preaching at all – more about how Jesus related to individuals.)

In Acts, they ‘preached the good news (of the kingdom), or ‘preached the word (of God)’.

The epistles talk about preaching ‘Christ (crucified)’ and ‘the gospel (of God/Christ)’.

Could we see it as just ‘communicating the good news about Jesus’? Yes, but we’ve thought before about people’s very different versions of what constitutes ‘good news’. So, with no time spent on theological accuracy, here’s my rough summary of what I **now** try to communicate, alongside what I **used to** communicate. I’ve chosen the headings ‘witness’ and ‘evangelism’ as they describe what I try to do (or not do).

|                                 | <b>Witness</b>                                                                                                                           | <b>Evangelism</b>                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Contact, and then...            | inclusion                                                                                                                                | persuasion                                                                                                                                 |
|                                 | community and sharing                                                                                                                    | top-down telling, individualistic (me and my salvation)                                                                                    |
|                                 | love and acceptance, whatever your view                                                                                                  | the Bible sets the standard of right and wrong                                                                                             |
| If you doubt...                 | that’s fine; we all have doubts                                                                                                          | you can’t be a full member                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Underlying theology</b>      | God’s loving acceptance, but, realistically...                                                                                           | <b>We are rejected by God unless...</b>                                                                                                    |
|                                 | ...we need God’s help to live as God wants, so the cross provides the way and the power ( <b>expiation</b> of the stain of sin), then... | <b>...we accept that God punished Jesus instead of us; believe that, and you’re forgiven (<b>propitiation</b> of God’s anger), then...</b> |
|                                 | ...we work hard to live a life of service, in gratitude, in the power of the Holy Spirit.                                                | ...we work hard to live a life of service, in gratitude, in the power of the Holy Spirit.                                                  |
| <b>Other issues</b>             | sounds a bit vague and wishy-washy                                                                                                       | crime-and-punishment based                                                                                                                 |
| What if they refuse to believe? | they are still welcome, on their own terms                                                                                               | we preached the gospel, they rejected it, that’s their fault                                                                               |

<sup>39</sup> That is to say, the biblical ‘evangelist’ is **not** someone who ‘seeks to convert others to the Christian faith, especially by public preaching’.

|                           |                                                                                                |                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ‘Justification by faith’? | trusting in Jesus, whose death washes away our sin / gives us power to overcome it             | trusting in Jesus, so his death protects us from the wrath of God                                   |
| Hell?                     | our life is sustained by God’s love, so if we finally reject that love, we will cease to exist | God’s punishment will rest upon us (for ever?), since we refused to accept Jesus’ sacrificial death |
| Judgment?                 | restoration – finally setting things right                                                     | retribution – people finally getting what they deserve                                              |

Sorry if this is too polarised; I’m just trying to contrast ‘what we’ve always been taught’.

Paul Bev. 12.5.23

## 276 Romans trap? Maybe not!

Many thanks to ‘Ian’, a long-established church leader, who has read my articles over the years but has largely restrained himself when I’ve gone astray! He has recently responded – really helpfully – to a number of my radical ideas.

He’s not impressed by my ‘Roman trap’. It seems I may be mistaken in my reading of Rom 2:1-16.<sup>[272]</sup> Ian says that I’m reading it ‘in a literal, wooden translation’ and that ‘It is not addressed to BIJs as such. It is a rhetorical *you*’. In other words, Paul is saying ‘*anyone* who... judges’. Ah, that now makes sense of Tom Wright’s (less-wooden) translation of v.1 (Tom’s italic, my blue):

<sup>1</sup> So *you* have no excuse – *anyone, whoever you are*, who sits in judgement!

Drat! I was sure I was right! So this is *not* a case where ‘they’ (people whose theology I don’t agree with!) are taking a scripture addressed to one group of people and applying it to another. (But I’m unrepentant on other examples such as ‘the wages of sin’ being a misuse of scripture.)

So what *is* Paul on about in Romans 1 & 2? Ian again: ‘Chapter one... is about humanity as a whole and how not worshipping the true God and worshipping idols instead leads to depravity.’ Agreed. And then he explains (I think I’ve got this right...) that while believers are assured of acceptance by God, through Jesus’ death, we will still be judged ‘on the last day’ on the basis of our lives – i.e. it *does* matter how we behave, day to day; we can’t just do what we like. (Tom is strong on this point, too.)

On another topic, Ian said, ‘Romans 1 is not your friend. I think it is possible to argue that most Biblical references to homosexuality are talking about homosexual behaviour on the part of heterosexual persons [but...] What the Romans passage does though is it describes homosexual acts as dishonourable/impure and shameless, depending on your translation.’

While I greatly appreciate Ian’s more generous (but firm) approach to the issue of gay marriage, on this one I’m still unrepentant, sorry.

First, yes, Romans 1 speaks of depravity, but I don’t believe that Paul’s list was ever intended to be a *definition* of what is or isn’t depraved (although that is how those verses have been used). Look at the list! Every action is *obviously* depraved. That’s simply the *starting assumption* in Paul’s mind: gay sex *is* depraved. End of.

That's echoed by Ian's comment: 'It is hard to argue that there were any circumstances in which the apostles would have said gay marriage was OK.' And I agree... but why?

Am I allowed to ask whether the apostles would have *changed their minds* had they had the benefit of modern knowledge about sexuality, and had they encountered fully committed Christians in loving gay marriages?

Or are we saying that *every* attitude of the apostles towards human behaviour is true and unchallengeable (e.g. check out 1 Cor 11:1-16)?

Paul Bev. 14.5.23

## 277 Exam time: Alpha minus?

Did you read my article about evangelism?<sup>[275]</sup> I wonder how you reacted to its radical ideas? My friend 'Ian' was unhappy at my idea of *not* focusing on persuasion. OK, I accept that there was a fair bit of persuasion going on in the early church, but...

1) *Does the church today have to use the same model of witness as used then?* Discuss.

In the meantime, here's what shocked me when I reread my article. In the table, I wrote:

### Underlying theology:

We are rejected by God unless...  
...we accept that God punished Jesus instead of us;  
believe that, and you're forgiven (propitiation of God's wrath)

2) *Is that really the core of what we believe about God?* (I may have over-egged it, but that **is** essentially what I was taught, and what I believed for 50 years. Stark isn't it?!) Discuss.

3) *Does that sound like the message of Jesus, when crowds flocked to hear him?* Discuss.

I've already done my corrections (after Ian 'marked my paper' – joke!) on one of my ideas,<sup>[276]</sup> and disagreed on another, but I was hugely encouraged that a church leader should say, '*the NT never says explicitly that Jesus was punished or experienced wrath*'.

When I asked where that radical view came from, and which books expressed it, he said, 'Having come across rival atonement theories, I did my own study of the NT, carefully looking at each passage to see what it did and did not say explicitly.' But he stressed the word 'explicitly', saying that there are many expressions in the NT which people could read and say, 'it is obvious that this is about punishment/wrath'.

He did suggest three books, two of which I already have, and then did a quick tour of some of the main passages used in support of penal substitution, the central one being Isaiah 53, one of the most-quoted passages in the NT. His point was that it uses poetic language, and why, where it's quoted in rational prose, is there no *explicit* teaching about Jesus being punished by God?<sup>40</sup>

And to add to that: there was no mention of *any* kind of substitutionary view of atonement until early in the second millennium, and the idea of *penal* substitution wasn't expressed until well into that millennium.

So our job then, as 21st-century Christians, is to persuade unbelievers that God punished Jesus, and unless they believe that, they can't be full members of the church?!

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<sup>40</sup> For an alternative reading of Is 53, try Derek Flood, *Healing the Gospel*, ch 8; hard going but I found it very helpful.



Does anyone have the feeling that something might have gone astray here?

But God is so *desperate* to have people know his love that even when the church gets things badly wrong, he will still use us.

And our final question on this paper:

4) *The Alpha Course has proved to be a very effective evangelistic tool. To what extent might centring on community, sharing a meal, and being free to express your doubts be a factor?*

Maybe we could take the penal substitution *out* of Alpha?!

Paul Bev. 15.5.23

## 278 The lost message of Jesus?

After six years, have I finally found the lost message that set the early church alight?

Right from article <sup>[1]</sup> I've known what *wasn't* the message: 'You were evil from the day you were born, you are separated from God, condemned by God, but Jesus died to set you free. Hallelujah!' (I've put it starkly, but is that *not* what you and I have always been taught?)

And I know *why* that is not the message: it doesn't fit with Jesus' teaching. The Prodigal Father wraps his arms around the pig-shit son *and* around the self-righteous (a different form of pig-shit) elder brother, and is only interested in *restoring* them; it's not about *retribution*.

Even the final judgment (which is about 'them' finally getting what 'they' deserve, right?) is actually about *restoration*, putting things *right* at last. And this means that *we* will suffer at the final judgment, as God strips away the wrong in us and restores us to full and final relationship.

So, no, the central message is not: my personal salvation + your (plural; i.e. those we manage to *persuade*) personal salvation => then all will be well.

So what *is* the message? I think it's: **Jesus is Lord** – *that* is the good news.

'Eh? What?!' Sadly, because it's been ignored, we really haven't got a clue what it means. Maybe we need to explore it?

One clue came from a very dear Christian friend this week: We need 'Jesus is **Lord**' + '**Jesus** is Lord'. The latter says it's the *person* who is the **Lord**. Let's explore that!

Maybe this is the same as 'the **kingdom**'? (Do we actually mean anything, each time we pray for it to '**come**'?!) Exploration needed?

But for the message to spread, it has to be something that *works*, something that makes a real difference in the everyday situations we face. My real situation is Sue's dementia, and every day I thank God for drawing us into the open, welcoming, inclusive community of St Ed's.

And for Sybil,<sup>[249,256]</sup> the real situation is her terrible mental health, on antidepressants for 16 years, feeling estranged from her children and grandchildren. Clearly, persuading her about personal sin isn't going to help. Frustratingly, when I visited her and I popped into the local church (Sybil owns a long bargepole!), I sensed a St Ed's-like community: with open arms they welcomed me and prayed for me and for Sybil. Thy kingdom come in Knutsford, please, Lord!

And what day it is today? It's the forgotten festival – Ascension Day – totally ignored by most Christians, I'm guessing. What is it about, anyway? 'Jesus is Lord', perhaps?

Maybe all we need is Christmas (Emmanuel, God with us), Good Friday (Jesus' death solves the problem of personal sin) and Easter Day (proof for persuading people). Who needs Ascension?

Sorry, I'm not being cynical, really. There is hope, but we've got some work to do to recover the lost message, right?

Paul Bev. (Ascension Day) 18 May 2023

## 279 *Spiritual schizophrenia in our DNA?*

Are my articles of any use to anyone? I hope so, and some of you do say so, but what am I trying to achieve? Most of all, it's to challenge 'what we've always been taught', to go back to the Scriptures and check it out. But it's difficult, especially for those of us who are older.

Why are we sometimes so unwilling to change, to metanoia, to repent?<sup>[271]</sup> Maybe we feel we're 'holding the line' against forces that are threatening the church – a worthy reason.

But maybe we *do* need to change in some areas because the church *does* get it wrong, historically, and Christians in 2023 do inherit some of those wrong attitudes – it's in our DNA.

I've already looked at the 'General Confession',<sup>[215]</sup> which I can still recite, from my Christian infancy in the late 1960s. It's from the 1662 Communion Service and refers to '*our manifold sins and wickedness;*' it adds that we're '*provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us*'.

When I looked it up just now, I also read a dire warning in that service – I guess referring to Paul about being '*guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord*'<sup>1 Cor 11:17</sup> – saying '*We eat and drink our own damnation, not considering the Lord's body; we kindle God's wrath against us; we provoke him to plague us with divers diseases, and sundry kinds of death.*' **What?!**

'Yes, but we're not even in the CofE!' Maybe not, but this wrong idea of what God is like is still in our DNA: I guess that most UK Christians are descended from that view of God (and/or the Catholic branch of DNA).

But then again, also in our DNA is the General Thanksgiving in that same service; this too I can recite. Talk about schizophrenia! This is chock full of *good* attitudes, Jesus-like attitudes:

*Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us, and to all men. We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all, for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, and that we shew forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives; by giving up ourselves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with thee and the Holy Ghost be all honour and glory, world without end. Amen.*

That expresses well how I feel these days about God.

Maybe I'm *not* entirely wrong about 'the Roman trap',<sup>[272,6]</sup> we *are* a little un-Jesus-like, we *do* want 'those evil people' to be punished. But God's passion is for **restoration**, and not retribution.

Paul Bev. 21.5.23

## 280 Why don't they believe?

### (Or, what is it they don't believe in?)

Have your children followed the faith? If not, what should our attitude be to them? What have we been taught? Clearly, if they don't believe, they are going to hell and so we should try to persuade them back, or at least get them to come to church – maybe at Christmas – to 'hear the gospel'.

Let's try a different approach. Let's try to see things from *their* point of view – otherwise we're making the same mistake that I made by trying to persuade some of my friends (some of you!) to change your minds.<sup>[265]</sup>

They are (well, my 'kids' are, at 42 and 44) loving, caring members of their families, and their communities, concerned about global issues, etc, etc. And so what did we give them as children? Well, I think we gave them a series of stumbling blocks to belief, some of which I've discussed over these past few years, some of which I've come to believe are unbiblical, un-Jesus-like.

The most crucial is the 'good news' based on a 'crime and punishment' paradigm<sup>[272]</sup> (sin as wrongdoing) instead of the real Good News of knowing a person – the prodigal Father, the self-sacrificing Jesus, the ever-present Helper. But I've talked about this endlessly as I've journeyed...

I hate being negative, but that's what stumbling blocks are – negative. Here's one example I baulked at in a book I was just given, celebrating the work of an excellent young people's group that we supported for many years. It was in a photo of a youth leader 'giving a sex talk' in the 1990s (when our kids were that age). On his flip chart, in capitals, numbered 1 to 3, were: 'lasciviousness', 'concupiscence' and 'defraudation'. I had to look up the middle word (a posh word for 'lust'), but I have no idea about 'defraudation'. (Maybe you know? But the OED doesn't recognise it as a word.) But why are Christians so obsessed by sex?!

Looking with their eyes, another example is that they see us as saying that people born in other cultures/religions are going to hell because they haven't believed in what we believe in.

And I haven't even mentioned the massive stumbling block that their loving, faithful gay friends are 'idolising self-fulfilment through sexual desire', as one local vicar put it. And maybe that's a discussion for another day: 'When does sexual desire become lust?' Does a marriage certificate make the difference? I think you can see the problem.

To me, the underlying problem is our dualism. Our whole thinking is binary: have you got 'it' or not, but relationships are not binary.

Which reminds me of another stumbling block in our family: 'Have you received the gift(s) of the Holy Spirit yet [or not]?' Binary, again. Polarising.

No solutions, sorry. Well, unless... Tim and I do strongly agree on the desperate need for community, from individual level to nations. Maybe 'the kingdom' that Jesus talked about?

Would Jesus recognise the 'gospel' we are preaching? Did Jesus preach exclusion or inclusion?

Paul Bev. 27.05.23

## 281 What did Romans do for us?!

I've been a bit quiet of late, sorry; my enthusiasm dwindled (en-theo-ism – 'God in me'). I did get very excited by Psalm 103 – am still excited by it – David's vision, written [one thousand years](#) before Jesus: '[God] forgives all your sins', i.e. even before Jesus died!

But God led me out of the doldrums through my studies of [Romans](#) with Tom Wright, and I saw again the glorious vision of the Good News that is Jesus. Truly wonderful!

In my articles, I try desperately to be positive, but it's seeing the negatives in 'what I've always been taught'<sup>[e.g. 280]</sup> that inspires me to appreciate the positives. This is where my writing started,<sup>[1]</sup> trying to help friends and family who 'don't believe' (in what?!).

Tom (re-)lit my flame with his 'righteousness'. What does that word convey to you? 'Doing right'? Or maybe, slightly better: 'imputed righteousness', i.e. Jesus' death on the cross makes it 'just-as-if-I'd' never sinned (just-ified).

But Tom tells us that the Greek word is way bigger than our simplistic ideas of 'doing right and wrong', and so he translates it 'covenant justice'. (Here's his 3:21-24 – see how this massively expands our view of the gospel!)

But now, apart from the law (though the law and the prophets bore witness to it), God's [covenant justice](#) has been displayed. God's [covenant justice](#) comes into operation through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah, for the benefit of all who have faith. For there is no distinction: all sinned, and fell short of God's glory – and by God's grace they are freely declared to be in the right, to be [members of the covenant](#), through the [redemption](#) which is found in the Messiah, Jesus.

The gospel is way more than the 'me-and-my-salvation' that we've been fed for decades (centuries?). It's about trusting (faith) the Person who, for millennia, has been drawing people into that covenant community, by whatever means were available at the time (e.g. Ps 103!).

We've been so keen to defend 'the truth of the gospel' that we have systematised it and ended up saying, effectively, 'The only way God [can](#) forgive sins is...' Indeed, what catalysed this article was my NIV Study Bible, which told me that the main purpose of Romans is 'to present the basic system of salvation'. (cf. Jesus' '*life in all its fullness*'.)

God can forgive sins (and always [has](#) forgiven sins – ask David!) in any way he darn well pleases – thank God! We limit what 'God [can](#) do' at our peril. So we can trust God for our friends and family, and we can trust God for those who have never heard about Jesus. Indeed, many of our F&F have 'never heard' – well, not about the REAL Jesus, but only the condemning, hell-wielding tyrant that the church has often portrayed.

Don't worry, I'm not advocating universalism; but God's love is so great that to specify in theological detail, 'the only way God [can](#) save people', is to totally underestimate what Romans can do for us; indeed, to totally underestimate God.

Paul Bev. 18.6.23

## 282 People, people, people

What was really important to Jesus? I ask because maybe we should have the same priorities, right? And maybe this was why Jesus was so popular – well, popular with [some](#) people, if not with the religious leaders.

What was the priority for the religious leaders of his day? Maybe this was why they were so [unpopular](#) with those who followed Jesus.

I think I could probably stop here and you could work it out for yourselves, right? My shortest article ever – under 100 words! Oh, go on then, I'll use the other 400.

For Jesus, it was people and our relationships with one another, and it is the attitudes of our hearts that really, really matter. For the Pharisees, it was our actions; obeying the rules.

To be fair to the religious leaders of today, it's much easier to specify actions: do this and don't do that. Then, as a leader, you can look around your flock and decide which church members need a metaphorical clip around the ear.

And not just those **in** the church; we can see clearly what 'they' are doing, and we must speak out and name the evil things 'they' are doing ('lights in a dark world'), and we must make sure that we don't allow 'their' evil ways to mould our thinking in the church.

(But always, it's about actions, not about attitudes.)

There was a time when we used to call a spade a spade: some people were 'living in sin'. But now we don't bother; I gather that some churches are even willing to baptise the children of people 'living in sin', without insisting that they get married first. Shocking! Can you see how the church is being forced into the evil mould of the world?!

And some churches are allowing women to lead. Again, this is going against the clear teaching of the Scriptures, that men should be the leaders, and the women – as equals, of course – should take their roles of supporting the leaders. (The world's mould again.)

Not to mention our couldn't-care-less attitude to divorce, which again the Bible – including Jesus himself – has very clear teaching about.

But to revert to being positive again, almost everyone you talk to in Taverham, where we live, says that St Ed's is 'such a welcoming place' – whether they attend the church or not. Is it because we have a really well-trained welcome team? OK, we're not a perfect church, but I think what counts with people is our non-judgemental welcome of all-comers.

Does 'non-judgemental' mean 'anything goes'; are we saying it doesn't matter what you do? No, it means that we try to help people in the difficult real-life situations they face, and insist that how we treat each other is the central issue; that's what leads to restoration of relationships, and not 'sticking to (somebody's) rules'.

What is most important to your leaders – or to you, if you are the leader?

Paul Bev. 3.7.23

## ***283 Gay marriage policies – implications***

All churches have rules and policies and, over time, some of these rules change, such as on remarriage of divorcees, and women in leadership. Hopefully, decisions on these issues are based on biblical principles but, following Jesus' example, we need to consider the effect on individuals. To be fair, Jesus seemed more concerned about people than about rules.

The Church of England (CofE) will only allow the remarriage of divorced people 'in exceptional circumstances' but it does at least allow clergy to conduct services of blessing for people who have had civil marriages. As the CofE works towards clergy conducting services of blessing for gay marriages, this has human implications.

I have discussed this issue with a number of long-term friends, not all of whom share my view that gay Christians should be allowed to follow their consciences and form lifelong relationships (or not) as they feel God is guiding them.

If your church takes the view that any gay sexual activity is, by definition, a sin then clearly the church cannot be seen to condone such sin. So if you acknowledge gay marriage in any way, you are saying that sin doesn't matter, and that has implications for individuals. Any so-far-celibate gay Christians in your congregation could be led into sin, based on the example of other actively gay Christians. And Jesus has very strong warnings for 'anyone [who] causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin'.<sup>Matt18:6</sup>

I have talked to friends in two CofE churches that are taking this very seriously. Their churches are saying that unless the bishops *reverse* their decision to bless gay marriages, they may withdraw finance from the central church, and may even consider pulling out of the CofE altogether.

One of those friends, who is in a large and well-known CofE church in London, said that they do have a number of gay couples within their church, and that some of them are in positions of responsibility. Now, when one of my non-CofE friends said that their church doesn't allow people in gay relationships to take any form of responsibility, I was deeply saddened, but maybe that is the more consistent approach.

We each need to consider how our views – and the actions based on them – affect other people, both those already within the church and those whom we long to draw into the love of God.

You well know my views about the damaging effect that the traditional view of gay activity has both on gay Christians and on many people outside the church, whether gay or not, who consider that view to be discriminatory and even offensive.

Please, we urgently need to discuss this within our churches and decide how we move forward and best reflect our Saviour's love to those around us.

Paul Bev. 31.7.23

## **284 The trouble with Christians...**

*(Disclaimer: I'm writing this while sitting facing a mirror; you can probably guess why.)*

Sue and I thank God for the lovely people he's given us to share the final stage of our lives with, but we all know that fellow Christians aren't always the easiest to get on with! Why?

Well, try this: think of Christians that you find difficult. What is it about them that you struggle with? For me, it's often their insistence that they are right about things [checks mirror], and also that they have a bee in their bonnets about certain things [checks again].

To be fair to ourselves, God has given us the Bible, and the Bible tells us what's right and wrong, so we have a responsibility to tell others what's right and wrong.

Really? Is that what God wants Christians to do? Certainly, the common caricature of Christians is that they sound off about this and that sin (while often busily sinning, anyway). Unfair? Maybe, but caricatures are usually based on actual observation of a person's character, even if they are somewhat exaggerated.

In our churches, we do have to make some decisions about right and wrong, but is every issue susceptible to that simple binary judgement? [Have you yet detected a buzzing bee?] Is everything either 'right' or 'wrong'? Can some things be more ideal and some less so?

Sure, it's comforting to know exactly what's right and what's wrong – much easier than dealing with, 'Well, it depends on the situation', but I do think Christians tend to err on the side of being too prescriptive, too simplistic.

The Pharisees were constantly probing Jesus with implied or direct questions: 'Is such and such right or wrong?' But Jesus, knowing that real life is more complicated, pointed to a better way.

[Releases the bee...] So what should a gay Christian do? Simple! Gay sex is a sin; you must therefore remain celibate. End of.

Your desire for a lifelong soul partner with whom you can share deeply and form a stable base for yourselves and to serve others is not for you, sorry! And because gay sex is a sin, you'd better avoid getting too close to those of the same sex, lest you fall in love: you know that your love for that person cannot and must not be allowed to flourish. Paul is clear on this whole area in 1 Cor 6; and in v18 he says, 'Flee from sexual immorality.'

The intimate relationships of marriage and the (hopefully) stable base those marriages form are a crucial part of a life-affirming social setup, but while some Christians are called to celibacy, those who are gay have no choice, sorry – that's the rule.

Do you see this as a simple right/wrong issue? Fine, but *if you are mistaken*, you carry a heavy responsibility: you could be causing unnecessary pain for a significant proportion of Christians, and turning people away from Jesus' kingdom by your insistence on your view.

Paul Bev. 3.8.23

## **285 Standing against the moral slide**

One of the strongest counter arguments I hear about gay marriage is that we need to stand against the moral slide. This idea was behind an article I was just sent, which showed the early church's distinctiveness, and the author concluded:

*In as much as marriage reflects Christ's love for the church, Christians' commitment to marriage is a mean[s] of proclaiming that love.*

My response was that this is a reason to *encourage* gay marriage, which supports what the author was advocating – faithful, monogamous, loving, committed relationships.

Now, when the New Testament was written, there was no such thing as a committed, loving gay relationship (as far as we know), so we have to take the principles given to us by Jesus and try to apply them to the current situation.

The easiest approach is just to take the literal approach of, 'Well, it says in the Bible...' and continue to say that any gay sex is a sin, full stop. But if we had continued to follow purely literal interpretations of the Bible, we'd still be insisting that the sun rotates around the earth, that the earth is 4000 years old (or whatever), and a lot more besides.

No, we need to ask what the Bible actually says and then see how it applies today. And we know how Jesus saw, in his day, that people were being hurt by the Pharisees' (albeit well-meaning) literal interpretations, so he broadened people's views (and he often got in trouble for 'breaking the rules'). And Paul did exactly the same sort of thing, writing about how we should understand the (OT) Scriptures in terms of the life and teaching of Jesus.

But one starting point for me is to ignore the arguments of those who see being gay as some form of 'condition' that can be 'dealt with'. I accept that some people are, by nature, sexually attracted to people of the same sex, and I then – along with them – ask what is best for them as people, given the Bible's view that 'it is not good for humans to be alone'.

And we should probably also apply Paul's pragmatic advice in 1 Cor 7, including v9, 'But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.'

These discussions aren't easy, but they are important because if we blindly accept the church's traditional view on gay relationships, people are being hurt. As I said,<sup>[284]</sup> gay Christians are being forced to live lonely celibate lives,

possibly having to avoid close relationships with people of the same sex, lest they fall in love and be hurt (and hurt the other person).

Those who, like me, no longer accept the traditional view on gay sex are nevertheless keen to maintain the exact same moral stance that the Bible advocates for heterosexuals, and that's our distinctiveness. That's why I support gay marriage: it's part of standing against the moral slide.

Paul Bev. 6.8.23

## 286 What is church for?

I've tried repeatedly to write something like this article, but it wouldn't gel, so I emailed my 'reader' list and asked, 'What is the purpose of your church?' (Better: what is *God's* purpose?) One reply resonated: 'To build and celebrate community both in the church and in the village – and bring glory to God by so doing.'

After five years wrestling with the Bible – especially the OT, which I used to cherry pick – a number of strands have developed for me, and I'm trying here to draw them together.

First, what is God's overall plan for the whole world, from Genesis to Revelation, with Jesus as the central focus? I think it's to bring heaven to earth – but what does that mean?

Genesis shows that it started well, but we thought we knew better, so God withdrew his presence. Because of his great love, God has come to us again and again – and each time we thought we knew better.

Our view of God has progressed over the 3000 years since Abraham: we are no longer war-like tribes – kill or be killed – and we no longer see God (the gods) as capricious and needing to be placated with sacrifices... well, hopefully not.

God comes supremely, of course, in Jesus – but we thought we knew better and killed him. God turned that into the final victory over sin and death. What's more, God came by his Spirit, who lives *in* us, so that *we* can bring God to others, bring heaven to earth.

And in Revelation we are promised how heaven will fully and finally come to earth, and all (our) wrongs will be righted in the ultimate victory of good over (our) evil.

The next big strand for me is that of 'community'. We need community at every level from family to church, to area, to country... and internationally. Unless we can *all* work together, this world is going to descend into chaos and darkness.

And, for me, what brings these strands together is the binding force of the Lord's prayer, which is now a central part of my life.

*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth* – God will come to earth, but we have to cooperate with God for that to happen.

*Give us this day our daily bread; forgive us our trespasses* – that's the community, and we have to cooperate with God for that to happen.

No form of church is 'right' or 'wrong' – we all get it wrong. I see it as a spectrum, and I have personal experience of both extremes. Now, this is a biased view, I know, but I'm so much happier in my (our) current position.

One end focuses more on individual sin and individual salvation, what's right and what's wrong, and when you believe, you can *then* belong to that community.



The other end focuses more on being an inclusive, welcoming community, trying to make a difference now. Then, by belonging, people come to believe in Jesus.

Paul Bev. 29.9.23

## **287 Baby and bathwater**

In a brief email exchange with my theological hero, Tom Wright, he used the terms ‘traditionalist’ and ‘revisionist’, confirming that he was still of the former persuasion. That’s what I had guessed because, in two passages where sex was mentioned, he had used the phrase, ‘one woman and one man’.

My email asked if he had changed his view, but it was a stupid question, really. Can you imagine just how difficult it would be for such a high profile Christian to admit to having changed his mind on such a high-tension issue? My admiration for the high-profile Christian ethicist, David Gushee, therefore increased further.<sup>[265]</sup> Tom revealed that he had faced an extremely unpleasant reaction for publicly supporting the traditionalist view, as David had for admitting having changed his mind.

I’ll admit now that I found it difficult to change my mind on this topic, because of my feelings about what one traditionalist friend delicately called the ‘plumbing issue’, and I’ll admit to feeling less negative towards female gay sex. Sorry, but I’m just being honest. And while I’m being way too frank, please be assured that sex doesn’t have to be penetrative to be extremely satisfying.

Anyway, when I asked last time about the purpose of the church, one response centred on ‘salt and light’. I asked for clarification, and was reassured that the idea was *not* to try to stop the moral slide by telling people what God’s standard is – but I fear that this *is* what is in many Christian minds, e.g. the vicar I mentioned.<sup>[255]</sup>

Context, context: I went back to Matthew 5, and the context of salt/light is the beatitudes, a very uncomfortable passage if one self-tests on each beatitude – I tried to apply it to my own attitudes in my writings. Ouch!

But I’m not daft enough to think that I can persuade anyone (especially those of my sort of age) to change their minds. More realistic is for those of us who have become revisionists to help our younger colleagues – those who are more willing to question the traditionalist view – to think through these issues.

So where’s the baby? Sorry, yes. The beatitudes, and salt and light, tell us that what really, really matters is how we treat one another, and sex (because it’s such a powerful force) is definitely an area where we can *mistreat* others. So when a husband says that he no longer loves his wife and has fallen in love with someone else, it’s his decision – I can’t judge – but if he’s a Christian husband, he needs to take very, very great care because relationships are paramount.

So the bathwater is society’s low view of sex, as a commodity, and for me the baby is the committed gay relationship through which (against societal pressures) God can give the couple love, fulfilment, stability, mutual support, etc, etc, just as for straight couples, and can make them a real blessing to others. May it be so.

Paul Bev. 9.10.23

## **288 A totally different paradigm**

Yes, OK I over-analyse things, but something changed when we moved churches over six years ago; life is different now, so why am I happier in my faith than I ever have been?

Everyone's faith is different, everyone's church is different; it's a continuum. So as I contrast the paradigm shift that I've experienced, I just offer these observations in case they might help you in your journey.

These are just bullet points (sometimes bordering on caricature, sorry) that reflect the issues I was unhappy about. You may want to argue against some of them, but maybe some will reflect uneasiness in your own faith, or your own church's teaching. If so, do argue with God about them – or with me!

(The two font colours are just so I can use note form and not waste words.)

God is holy, we're sinful, we're rejected/separated unless we believe in Jesus.

God is loving and accepting (*Our father*), but we're flawed; we can be rescued through Jesus' death.

We're off to heaven when we die, thankfully to escape the bad stuff we experience now.

It's about bringing heaven to earth now (*thy kingdom come*), and fully when Christ returns.

The essential thing is personal salvation – are you saved or are you not?

The essential thing is being community – you're included, we're all in this together.

It's all about the individual (me, my sin, my salvation, my relationship with God).

It's all about community (*our daily bread*, *our trespasses*).

Services are guilt-centric – OK, it's toned down from 'our manifold sins and wickedness ... provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation', but it's still there.

Services are love-centric, yet acknowledging the reality of evil.

Substitution: God's wrath falls on Jesus instead of us, so we live, 'as if we'd never sinned'.

On the cross Christ defeated the powers of evil and gave us power, through the Holy Spirit, to defeat our sin and that in the evil structures around us (*thy will be done on earth*).

Unbelieving spouses/friends/family?

They are doomed, so bring them to church to hear the gospel.

They are loved by God and are welcome to share our church – on their own terms.

e.g. 'You want your baby baptised?'

You first have to believe in Jesus and attend church – it's a service for believers only.

Here's what baptism means; these are the promises you'll make; is that OK with you?

Other religions are simply wrong and need converting.

Work with other faith communities to help '*thy kingdom come*' now.

Mission? Go to other people and places and tell them the truth of Jesus, maybe use aid as a platform for the gospel.

Mission? Serve people in your local community, or take your specialist skills to other communities (*give us this day our daily bread*).

Finally, as you've come to expect from me... gay relationships?

It's about the immutable sexual ethics clearly laid down in the Bible – sin and guilt.

It's about faithful relationships, serving one another, and together serving the community.

Paul Bev. 17.10.23

## 289 Teaching or indoctrination?

I have found it helpful last time<sup>[288]</sup> to lay out some of the strands of teaching that I've received (and tried to faithfully pass on) over my 55 years as a Christian. As a 20-year-old new convert in Cambridge I often had teaching from the likes of John Stott, so I had a really good grounding in Bible-based doctrines – and I'm genuinely grateful.

Coming from a dysfunctional family, I was drawn by the love I found, but it was soon supported by a well-argued, understanding of what the Bible teaches, and I was ready to 'prove' my faith to anyone ... but I never really questioned it.

So was that 'teaching' or 'indoctrination'? And what's the difference?

I was taught a series of doctrines, good and right doctrines, biblical doctrines, so was that **indoctrination**. (I'm guessing that 'indoctrination' started as a positive word.)

Let me give you an example that I've mentioned before.<sup>[183,215]</sup> In 1968, we were still using the 1662 Prayer Book, so every time I took communion I recited the 'prayer of humble access', including about my 'manifold sins and wickedness ... provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us'. In retrospect, I'm horrified by this negative image of God. No wonder the vast majority of I-used-to-go-to-church people that I meet feel negatively towards the Christian religion – that and a number of other reasons.

I'd say that I was well-meaningly indoctrinated.

It took a total loss of faith to enable me to step back, change my perspective, and look at the Bible's teaching afresh – especially Jesus' teaching. Thankfully, it has transformed my view of what God is like.

And today I've extended my list of strands of teaching (indoctrination?):

God is holy, we're sinful, we're rejected/separated unless we believe in Jesus.

We're off to heaven when we die, where we'll escape the bad stuff of now.

It's all about the individual (me, my sin, my salvation, my relationship with God).

Services are guilt-centric (wrath and indignation etc).

Substitution: God's wrath falls on Jesus instead of us.

Unbelieving spouses/friends/family are doomed to hell.

Other religions are simply wrong and doomed to hell.

Catholics are heretical and we should not fellowship with them.

Liberal theologians are trying to sweep away the truth of the Bible.

Leadership is God's calling on men, *not* women.

People who advocate speaking in tongues are heretical – that was for NT church only.

Couples who are unmarried, 'living in sin', are constantly sinning by doing so.

Divorced people who remarry are sinning by doing so.

With sincere apologies: gay sex is an abomination, AIDS is God's judgement on them.

How do you feel about those doctrines? Have you shared any of them? Questioned, rethought and changed your mind on any? It has taken me a lot of time and effort.

Paul Bev. 21.10.23

## ***290 Will this split the church?***

I want to try (difficult, given my strong views) to provide some factual information about the current situation on gay marriage. My experience is with the Anglican (CofE) church, but I have had some input from a church leader in a free church in the UK.

Background: If you are divorced then, in the Anglican church, you can't get remarried in church, although you can marry in a Register Office and then have a service of blessing in a church. And the situation is now similar for gay couples: what the bishops have recently agreed (following the lead of some of the free churches) is that vicars are allowed to offer a service of blessing to couples who are already in gay civil partnerships.

My guess is that many are ambivalent on this issue, saying that if it's what gay people want then why should they be not allowed to do so? But there is a strong anti movement among so-called Orthodox Anglicans.

A friend sent me a link to a web article<sup>41</sup> written by Cornelius Harding, a member of her own church homegroup (my previous church). It basically says that if we really love ‘our LGB friends’, we should hold to the traditional teaching:

...issues of human sexuality are a salvation issue, and so that without repentance those who engage in same-sex sexual relationships will be damned rather than saved.

and later

For Orthodox Anglicans to fail to continue with the apostolic teaching of the Church is an act of hatred which allows those who identify as LGB to be condemned to damnation.

You can see why he’s so concerned – it’s about the immortal souls of a large proportion of society, of church members, and of a growing proportion of the clergy – because more gay people seem attracted to the caring profession of church leadership.

So is this issue going to split the church? My previous church has already written to the bishop threatening to withdraw financial support from the diocese if they don’t *reverse* the decision on blessing gay partnerships; they are also talking about leaving the CofE altogether, though there are then issues about the legal title to their churches, into which they (we!) have ploughed quite a bit of money.

All I’m saying today is to urge any who haven’t really thought about this to do so. It is an issue of increasing urgency; it is an issue of church credibility. How many people do you know who have turned away from the church because of its condemnatory attitude?

But if God condemns gay couples unless they repent – and presumably split from their life partners – then that too is important to know.

Paul Bev. 25.10.23

## **291 Sin by definition**

I was quite shocked<sup>[290]</sup> when I read the web article by Cornelius Harding:

issues of human sexuality are a salvation issue, and so that without repentance those who engage in same-sex sexual relationships will be damned rather than saved.

...

For Orthodox Anglicans to fail to continue with the apostolic teaching of the Church is an act of hatred which allows those who identify as LGB to be condemned to damnation.

It sounds a bit harsh, but in a way, I think he’s right: if something you are doing is clearly against what the Bible teaches, and you persist and persist... well, what hope is there for your immortal soul?!

And he would also say that gay sex is such a direct challenge to God’s creation ordinance, of man and woman and procreation, that it makes the sin worse.

OK, let’s apply some cold clear logic here, and let’s think of a different sexual sin: Fornication (OED): ‘sexual intercourse between people not married to each other’. And I don’t need to look up Bible verses: sex outside marriage is clearly against apostolic teaching. So what about my friends Matt and Jenny? They aren’t married, but they are living together; will they too be damned rather than saved, for fornication?

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<sup>41</sup> <https://anglican.ink/2023/09/28/when-your-head-is-in-the-tigers-mouth-a-heartfelt-plea-to-orthodox-anglicans-in-the-cofe/>

Purely by definition, they are sinning, so are they not sinning? By one definition, they are sinning; by others they may not be. Who is right? Well, it depends on what you mean by 'marriage'. If you define marriage as a loving, committed relationship, then they are not sinning...

...and, no, I'm not taking the line that if a gay couple are loving and committed they are therefore not sinning. Rather, I'm trying to challenge the whole basis of the discussion.

What we're doing is looking at individual actions and trying to define if they are 'sins' or not. But isn't that *exactly* what Jesus got so cross about: 'Is it lawful to heal this man on the Sabbath?' The Pharisees were genuinely trying to help, giving clear definitions of sin.

I think that Jesus' (therefore God's) main concern is about motives and relationships. What is 'right' and what is 'sin' can't be determined by setting up a series of definitions. We feel safer if we have clear rules so we can check if and we're sinning or not, but is that really how a relationship with God works? Obey the rules and you'll be 'saved'?

So, do my friends Adam and Brian, Clare and Diane face eternal damnation for their actions. They and I (and a growing proportion of Christians) believe that, given what we now know about sexuality, the creation statement, 'it's not good for man/us/humans to be alone', is best fulfilled by seeking loving, committed, covenant relationships.

We might be mistaken, but we believe that our motives are right and good, and we trust God for our eternal salvation.

Paul Bev. 29.10.23

## 292 *Shining like stars*

I've recently been rereading a book I found helpful in 2018, near the beginning of my faith-rethink: Brad Jersak's *A more Christ-like God*, and Chapter 3 hit me so powerfully I kept rereading it. I desperately wanted to digest it for you, but I couldn't...not until our homegroup reached Philipians 2.

His chapter 3 is titled 'Freedom or love?' – about what we think God is like. Its importance is that, by worshipping God, we actually *become* like what (we think) God is like. This has helped me to see how I could have got it so wrong for 50 years.

We say that we base our faith on the Bible, right? And we have to interpret it, right? But we (translate it and) interpret it on the basis of what we/our church **think God is like**.

Philipians 2 nailed it for me. The chapter is all about our behaviour – shining like stars in the universe – a glorious vision of what the church could be like, please God! And near the beginning we read what 'shining' looks like:<sup>6-11</sup> Jesus, who, being in *very nature* God, emptied himself, and gave up his life in love for us. Glorious!

But that's not just an *example*; it's telling us what *God is like by nature*. And when we want to know the meaning of different bits of scripture and how to apply them, we must ask if our view fits with Jesus's (God's) very nature: love.

For example, what about verse 12: 'continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling'? As good post-Reformation Christians we cry out: you do **not** get to heaven by what you **do**; it's by faith alone! And I'm grateful to God for their clearing that up for us.

But what about the (Reformation-based?) translation, ‘with fear and trembling’? Tom Wright renders it, ‘with utter seriousness’ – a better fit with the God of 6-11. Only a small issue, yes, but it illustrates how our view of God changes our view of *everything*.

Now a personal example of how I once felt about God and how I responded: A repeating image for me was that I’m on a cliff-top, and I see a blind man walking straight towards the cliff. What do I say? ‘Excuse me, sir, might I have a few moments of your time?’ or ‘*Hey, mate, stop!*’ This image motivated me towards many years of evangelism: I spent hours and hours on the internet trying to *persuade* people that I know what God is like, what Jesus has done, and how they need to turn and believe, or [implied] they are doomed!

And how many people do you know today who won’t touch church with a barge-pole because of the way it portrays God? We might not be pulpit-thumping preachers, but we can still believe in, and portray (and embody?), a highly non-Philippians 2 God.

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, yes,<sup>2Cor 4:4</sup> but partly *he’s used us(!)* worshipping a less-than-Christ-like God!

Paul Bev. 4.11.23

## 293 Shining like stars II

When I write something down and you read it, you could misunderstand it for any number of reasons – language is a slippery customer – plus, I could be wrong, anyway. So when a friend came round and we chatted about my previous article, I found it really helpful.

She mentioned how problems can arise with emails. A great illustration! Clearly, if I’d had an email from her and it sounded as if she was being unpleasant, I’d be certain I’d misinterpreted it, knowing what a lovely person she is.

And that was my point. If you read something in Scripture, and it seems to depict God as finger-pointing and condemning, clearly you’ve misunderstood, and you need to go back to that passage, think again, talk to God about it, and perhaps look at other passages.

Tom Wright suggests that – from his knowledge of God’s Jesus-like character, I guess – that our traditional translation, ‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling’ might be better seen as the paraphrase: *Your task now is to work at bringing about your own salvation; and naturally you will be taking this with utter seriousness.*

That interpretation fits better with the context, anyway: those 18 verses are all about our behaviour and our attitudes, how we relate to other people, how we can shine like stars by – as my Bible titles it – *Imitating Christ’s humility.*

And let me illustrate from my own experience (a bit extreme, I know) just how badly we can go wrong by seeing God as condemning us if we don’t do, or believe, the right things.

After 40-odd years as a Christian, I ended up in what was effectively a sect. (I’m more able to talk about it now, as ‘Harry’ died this year.) It started as just a Bible study that Harry led, and I was happy to go along because he had prophetic and healing gifts, and I thought that validated his teaching. What I didn’t spot was that his teaching was slowly but steadily changing, in a ‘frog in hot water’ way. Thankfully, I suddenly woke up, realised, and left immediately, but it has taken 12 years and a change of churches for me to fully recover.

In that group I eventually became controlled by fear: if I didn’t follow Harry’s teaching maybe I wouldn’t make it and God wouldn’t accept me? Scary how a relatively intelligent bloke like me could be so taken in! But to a lesser extent are we allowing ourselves to be controlled by fear? If our behaviour or belief doesn’t match up to what the Bible teaches (or what the church *says* the Bible teaches!) maybe we might be condemned by God?

Philippians 2 is about developing our character and behaviour so that we have better and better relationships with others. OK, I had a good relationship with Harry, but my condemning attitude spoilt my relationships with those outside the group and nearly cost me my marriage, but thankfully Sue stuck with me.

Paul Bev. 6.11.23

## 294 Shining like stars III

I was powerfully struck by Brad Jersak's chapter 3, 'Freedom or love?' in his *A more Christlike God*, and I tried and failed to write about it. Our group study of Philippians 2 then helped my thinking to move on. Paul is concerned<sup>[1-18]</sup> that Christians should 'shine' – their behaviour should be Christ-like = self-sacrificing love.<sup>[6-11]</sup>

Add to that 'if you've seen me, you've seen the father',<sup>[Jn 14:9]</sup> and <sup>[6-11]</sup> becomes not just a helpful example: it's an actual definition of **what God is really like**. And this gives us a firm foundation for asking of any Scripture, 'What's this all about?' because if our view of a given verse/verses pictures God as anything other than a self-sacrificing-Jesus-like God, then we must have misinterpreted it. (That's my view, anyway.)

Cut to the chase: some OT passages say things like, 'And God told them to slaughter every man, woman and child' = genocide, pure and simple! And those passages are there – so do we just chop them out? Or do we ditch the OT altogether? But if we follow the way of Jesus, we can't, because Jesus, who knew his Bible (OT), said that not the least bit should be removed and, 'I have not come to abolish them but to **fulfil** them.'<sup>[Mt 5:17,18]</sup>

Here's how I see it. In Abraham's day, people were petrified of 'the gods' and tried to placate them with sacrifices. Even Abe really thought that God wanted him to sacrifice (kill: stick a dagger into and burn) his own son! Clearly, God-who-is-like-Jesus had a long road ahead to re-educate humankind. (I think theologians call it 'progressive revelation'.)

Sorry, but the OT writers all had an incomplete view of what God was like but, thankfully, God inspired them to also think and say things that would point us in the right direction. And they did write about a loving and merciful God, e.g. Moses: '...showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.'<sup>[Ex 20:6]</sup>

OK, along comes Jesus – pure, uncondemning love – no wonder people were irresistably drawn to him because they (especially the down-trodden) had been brought up on a diet of, 'God will condemn you unless you...' from the (well-meaning) Scribes and Pharisees.

Long story short: Jesus dies, comes back to life, bodily disappears (ascends), and the disciples then to try to come to terms with (a) what has just happened (wow!) and (b) Jesus' teaching, which they have been orally remembering and sharing.

Imagine their excitement ('Did not our hearts burn within us as he opened the Scriptures!') when they realised that God-who-is-like-Jesus had seeded the OT with hundreds of verses that pointed to exactly what they had just seen with their own eyes. No wonder the good news spread like wildfire. This self-sacrificing-Jesus-God, who is now Jesus the King (that's how Tom Wright translates 'Jesus Christ'), is the self-same God of the OT. Wow!

(Oh, I've not got to Brad's thing. Sorry, I'll try again tomorrow.)

Paul Bev. 9.11.23

## 295 *Shining like stars IV – Freedom?*

Trying to reach Brad Jersak's *A more Christlike God*, chapter 3, 'Freedom or love?', I had another detour: editing a book for a friend of my Tim's. It's sort of about education/ politics/history/philosophy/psychology/religion – well, life – relating to the amazing way the Nordic countries have transitioned from being dirt poor agricultural, ruled by clergy and aristocrats to among the richest, most industrialised countries in Europe in something like 100–150 years. What's *The Nordic secret*?!

Obviously, the poor needed education – this gave them the freedom to think for themselves and develop their potential – but it must be the right kind of education (for people of all ages), and that involves relationships. I can't precis 150,000 words, but one thing I hadn't appreciated was the crushing domination of aristocrats and clergy. Like the Pharisees before them: 'This is what God says you have to do!' But they now know not to just accept 'What you've always been taught' – think for yourself! (Isn't that what I've been doing?)

But the author thinks it's beginning to unravel; people are misusing that hard-won freedom, and the rich/poor gap is opening up again. I wonder why?

Now back to Brad 3, where he looks at two important moral strands, freedom and love – both important, both good, but his point is, when push comes to shove, which is **more** important. He asks what happens when our freedom is threatened; how do we react? That might be at a personal level or at any level up to international relations. (Somewhat germaine with the current Middle East situation.)

One thing that stuck in my mind when I read Brad's book in 2018 was the freedom to bear arms, and Charlton Heston's comment (then president of the NRA): 'I'll give you my gun when you pry it from my cold dead hands.' He had the right to protect his freedom.

The Nordics used to just accept the authority they were under and had little or no freedom. Then the general populus were given access to education, and as the 'believe and do what you're told' ethos changed, they flourished, massively. But pure freedom can go wrong – very wrong – it has to be tempered by love, unselfish laying-aside-of-freedom love, in the interest of others. (Does 'laying aside' sound familiar?)

So what about God? God is free. God can do anything. God has ultimate freedom to do whatever he wills. And God is good, so whatever he does is good? (Even genocide?<sup>[294]</sup>)

But **does** God exercise his total freedom and do whatever he wills? We could ask the OT authors and get one view – but it's an incomplete view of God. So maybe we'd better ask Jesus, the one who *...did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped...*

Anyway, if God does whatever he wills, and no-one can stop him, why did Jesus tell us to pray, 'Thy will be done'?!

I just re-prayed the Lord's prayer, and it's looking very different these days.

Paul Bev. 12.11.23

## 296 *What did Romans do for us?*

Sixteen chapters, 433 verses and, in English (NIV), a smidge short of 10,000 words. How much time do you think Paul spent writing that? Many, many hours, and for why?



And after the millions of words Christians have written explaining what Paul meant by what he wrote in Romans, what actually *is* Romans all about? To find out, I looked at the summaries in two Study Bibles. In a minute, I'll quote what they say about its *purpose*, but why is that so important?

Think of novels written by, say, Austen, Christie, Dahl, Dostoyevsky... do they all have the same purpose? Clearly not. Therefore, we *read them all in different ways*. And if we read Dahl as if it were a Dostoyevsky or vice versa, we would get very confused! How we read and understand Romans depends on what we think (or are *told* to think!) is its purpose:

*NIV Study Bible* (1987) has three 'purposes': 1) sort out some practical stuff about visits, 2) 'to present the basic system of salvation', 3) 'to explain the relationship between Jew and Gentile in God's overall plan of redemption.'

*NIV Life Application Bible* (2011) has five 'megathemes' (with *my comments* and *theirs*): 1) Sin (*what I've done wrong*), 2) Salvation (*how God fixes it for me*), 3) Growth (*how I deepen my relationship with Christ*), 4) Sovereignty (*'how God can save whomever he wills'*). 5) Service (*how I 'show love and sensitivity to others'*).

These summaries were written by teams of theologians who know more about God than I've ever forgotten, so they must be right, OK? And I'm guessing that most people reading this would agree that this is indeed what we've always been taught.

Well, you know me, a rebel at heart, so might there be *another* way to read Romans? What if it's *not* about 'me and my salvation', not about 'how I can avoid the wrath of God?' What if it's not about *me*, but about *God*?

Romans was written to Christians, many of whom were Jews; so could it be that Paul was concerned that they had a *totally wrong view* of God? Maybe he wanted them to repent, to change their minds, to metanoia? What if Paul is trying to show that God's main concern is *not* about (how to avoid) God's retribution; what if it's about how to restore people and to rid earth of injustice ('thy kingdom come on earth')?

Now, why did the early church explode with new life? Was it because people were told how to avoid God's wrath and punishment? Certainly, that's how I've always faithfully presented 'the gospel'.

Maybe the explosion was because of the *really, really* good news that God was *not at all* like they had always been taught, and so they repented (totally changed their view of God) and saw God as the loving, self-sacrificing Jesus of Nazareth, who is now Jesus the King! Reading Romans like that makes it look very different.

Paul Bev. 15.11.23

## 297 The Good News: Rebellion to Restoration

*Today, I want to try to put into words (my usual 500) the truly amazing Good News that I've found this past six years. I'll mainly be drawing on Derek Flood's (to me) mind-and-heart-expanding Healing the Gospel.*

*This is not a tract for those who haven't yet met Jesus; it's me expressing why I'm so happy, and why I no longer feel any need to apologise for what I believe.*

*You might spot loopholes in my arguments here, but please bear with me, and maybe talk to me; you and I can then get closer to God together.*

*After reading it, you might think, 'Yes, but how?!' Food for more articles, I think!*

*OK, let's get started.*

*Ready, steady, go...*

However you read the early chapters of Genesis, it tells us that God loves people and has provided a haven where we can live in harmony; harmony with God within that haven.

But it's not going too well, to say the least, and God gets really cross about it: God's wrath is directed towards people who deliberately hurt others (Rom 1), but he's also very cross with people who have a relationship with God, and yet who stand in judgment over others (Rom 2).

Because God loves us, he is also very unhappy when people are suffering – whether that's due to sin, sickness and death, or through the structures that humans have set up.

God has a very long-term plan to re-educate humans away from the cringing fear of 'the gods' who will crush you soon as look at you. God explains – and eventually shows us personally – that God wants nothing better than to totally restore us now, to that haven, and will one day totally restore everything.

God starts from where people are – where Abraham was – with the idea of sacrifice. OK, we know (certainly post-Jesus) that God *already* loves us desperately, and so sacrifices can't be aimed at 'making God love us', so what were they for?

God's aim was for sacrifice to be an outward sign that would effect an inward healing, i.e. to restore our relationship with God and each other. But at times, God got really cross and said, 'I hate your sacrifices!' because their lives weren't changing for the better – it was mere outward show, with no inward change.

Through the blood of the sacrifices, God was washing away people's sin, renewing, forgiving and restoring them... but then they sinned again – like painting the Forth Bridge. But Hebrews explains how God provided the one single ultimate sacrifice: Jesus was the perfect sacrifice that defeated the evils of sin and death, once and for all. Not just personal sin, but *all* sin; and not just sin, but also sickness and death – he died to restore us. (Rom 3, esp. 25,26, Rom 5)

And Jesus' death defeated the powers who promote those evils. (Col 2)

Hebrews contrasts the sacrifices – OT: people provided the sacrifices and God effected the change in people's hearts (washed away their sin) – NT: *God* provided the sacrifice and God (Jesus) *was* the sacrifice – the ultimate willing self-giving sacrifice. It wasn't the nails that held Jesus on the cross, it was Jesus' (God's) love. But both sacrifices, OT and NT, are for our sanctification, to heal us, change us, restore us, to make us new, right now!

God cleanses us through Jesus' sacrificial death; so we can then be agents of God's love in the world. God isn't planning to take us away from this evil world ('to heaven'); rather we're here to work with God in changing this world *now*, and God promises to bring heaven (God's domain) finally and fully to earth one day. What a glorious prospect!

Let's get working, folks! (Rom 12, 'living sacrifice')

Paul Bev. 20.11.23

## **298 The Good News: in the translators' hands**

In thinking about the Good News and how glorious it is,<sup>[297]</sup> I was greatly inspired by Tom Wright's translation of Romans (my highlights).

God put forth Jesus as the place of **mercy**, through his faithfulness, by means of his blood. He did this to demonstrate his **covenant justice** through the **passing over** (in the **divine forbearance**) of sins committed beforehand. This was to demonstrate his **covenant justice** in the present time: that is, that he himself is in the right, and that he **declares to be in the right everyone who trusts** in the faithfulness of Jesus.<sup>3:25,26</sup>

'Covenant justice' (more usually translated 'righteousness') to me emphasises **relationship** and **righting wrongs**, i.e. **restoring things**. Reading 'righteousness', I tend to just think of 'doing things right' (or wrong).

Now remember, those words were first written to Christians in Rome, a substantial minority of whom were Jews who had come to believe in Jesus. When they were in Jerusalem, they would have attended Yom Kippur at the temple, where the priest goes into the holy of holies and sprinkles blood on the mercy seat (i.e. Tom's 'place of mercy'). What would this ritual have meant to them *before* Jesus (BC)? Here's what I think they would have learnt from the (OT) Scriptures (all of which are inspired, says Paul<sup>2Tim3:16</sup>).

1) Sin is serious: God is angry when we hurt each other – having to kill an animal and drain its blood points to our needing a serious change of heart.

2) If they came to God in repentance, God would forgive them – and Jews (BC) were really grateful (see below).

Remember, those Jews who believed were still Jews; they still related to God in their Jewish ways – it just got ten times better! Imagine their huge joy when they saw that there was now one full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for sins. What a wonderful vision!

But even *before* they heard about Jesus, they knew that God would forgive their sins if they came in repentance, and they sang psalms such as 51 and 103:

Which verses to choose? I'm spoilt for choice:

*Praise the LORD ... who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion*<sup>103:3,4</sup>

*as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*<sup>103:12</sup>

*Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*<sup>51:7</sup> (Hyssop is what the priest used to sprinkle the blood.)

Do read those wonderful chapters and rejoice at God's free forgiveness – even BC!

But while Paul (and the psalmist) were rejoicing, some in Rome were emphasising God's wrath, and claiming that Paul (and the psalmist?) were 'soft on sin'.

I checked how 'place of mercy' has been rendered by different translators:

'propitiation' – 14  
'atoning sacrifice' – 8  
'mercy seat' – 6  
'expiation' – 4

(Wikipedia is helpful about the ongoing 'discussion' between propitiation and expiation.)

Paul Bev. 22.11.23

## 299 Good News: really helpful translation

My excitement level is growing as I again study Romans, and I can see the strands of my six-year journey coming together in Tom Wright's commentary, especially what he says about 1:16,17, Paul's famous statement, 'I am not ashamed of the good news...'

Here, I'll use Tom's commentary and his translation to focus my thoughts.

The main theme is God's overall plan, starting with Abraham, to rescue the whole world from evil, corruption and death and to bring his restorative justice to the whole world. Then, to answer our question, 'Yes, but how?!', we hear that (my bold) God's covenant justice is unveiled in it [the good news] and the just shall live by faith. Two key words.

One problem in working out *how*, is that we have to use English words, but thankfully Tom's translation has helped me to see how the different bits fit together (I think!).

Referring to God's plan, we know that he can bring his restorative justice to the whole world. And that is, in the end, what 'God's righteousness' or 'God's justice' means. I have translated the word as 'God's covenant justice' here in order to hold all these ideas together. As it's one of the central themes in the letter, it's vital that we get it straight.

So let me see if I've got this. Things are wrong, we're wrong, we've rebelled. God wants to sort out our mess and the world's mess. God's chief concern is restoration, and by God's grace we are forgiven, just as God's people were. Even in BC times, they were forgiven by faith, by trusting God to take away their sin.

But grace isn't fair (Yancey's classic *What's so amazing about grace* is good on this). **How** can people who do the Romans 1 stuff ('them') be freely forgiven; indeed, **how** can people who have Romans 2 judgmentalism ('us'?) be freely forgiven? It's unfair, really.

The answer in the early centuries was that the cross and resurrection simply brought victory over the powers of sin and death, and that God forgives whom he forgives (those who come to him in faith), as God did in the OT. Why do we keep asking **how**?

Jesus' parable of the prodigal father illustrates the unfairness. I think the older brother was right to be unhappy when the wayward son, having squandered half the family fortune, is given a ring and reinstated. **How**?

The woman caught in adultery? She was guilty, but Jesus declined to condemn her. **How**?

But why do we feel we need to 'explain' grace? Let's just accept it with grateful thanks, and let's get on and work with God on the great restoration plan.

Anyway, logically, if we're freely forgiven, does it matter if, as believers, we sin a little bit? Yes it does! say Paul and Tom: Romans 6 is a bracing chapter. Holiness *does* matter, because the wages paid by sin, you see, are death; but God's free gift...<sup>[6:23]</sup>

Paul Bev. 24.11.23

## 300 Celebrate Advent? Are you sure?

Approaching the season of Advent, I'm reading *On Earth as in Heaven*, a compilation of extracts from Tom Wright's books relating to the seasons of the church's year, so I turned to Advent, and it began to make more sense. I feel I can now really celebrate Advent!

The word ‘advent’ means ‘coming’ and, as one website says, ‘*Advent is the season of reflective preparation for Christ’s Nativity at Christmas and Christ’s expected return in the Second Coming.*’ The first ‘coming’ is OK; we can certainly celebrate God coming to earth, but how about the second?! Can we *celebrate* that? Are we looking forward to it? Why or why not?

Well, I follow Tom’s insistence that God’s Big Plan is *not* taking people *away* to a lovely place called ‘heaven’, away from the awful mess of earth. No, the Plan – which started with Abraham – was to sort out the mess here. The world, the universe, was created good, a place where God could live with his creation (heaven on earth), and God is on a long-term mission of total restoration of earth, then God will come and live among us. Great!

So what is the Second Coming? It’s God’s sure promise, God’s covenant: heaven *will* come back to earth, God in Jesus *will* return to bring his reign of justice and joy and peace and love, and we will worship God in our renewed, restored earth.

But I have one slight niggle. It’s all very nice for me, but what about my unsaved husband/ wife/children/friends? This is actually where I started<sup>[1]</sup> with trying to help my friend ‘Martha’, whose church tells her that the answer is evangelism. Try to persuade them, before it’s too late. Well, you can see the logic: they are heading for hell, they don’t know it, we should tell them – indeed, shout at them – to try to get them to realise! That’s certainly what any church I’ve ever been in has taught.

Pushing logical arguments isn’t always the best idea, but it’s how I work – an analyser and problem-solver. So try this logical progression, and prepare to be shocked.

The Bible uses the image of Jesus as the bridegroom and with us as the bride, so imagine a king whose son falls in love with a commoner and wants her to be his bride. An envoy is sent to invite her: come to the palace and marry the prince! You’ll be given all the wealth and status of a princess – you’ll *be* a princess. But you don’t have to; we’re not compelling you; the prince loves you and you’re free to accept or not. However, the wedding date is set, and if you refuse you’ll be thrown into prison and tortured – but it’s your free choice.

Is that really a ‘free’ choice? And is that what God is like? Is that what Jesus was like on earth? Maybe I’m mistaken, but isn’t this effectively what we’ve always been taught? Comments, please?

Paul Bev. 30.11.23

## **301 Advent: some serious questions**

As I quoted last time,<sup>[300]</sup> ‘Advent is a season for reflective preparation for ... Christ’s expected return in the Second Coming’. I still have questions about that.

Question: Is God ‘obliged’ to do anything? I ask because one highly respected theologian, ‘Arthur’, has written: ‘God was obliged ... to punish sin.’ If I ask Arthur why God was ‘obliged’, I’m sure he’ll give me a well-thought-out biblical explanation, but does the Bible have the right to say what God *must* do? Or am I being too simplistic?

I do understand there’s a real problem. Clearly, child abusers must be punished, and probably murderers in general, but what about stealing a loaf of bread to feed one’s family? Where does one draw the line? And who draws that line?

OK, so it’s Advent, and Jesus is coming back, bringing heaven to earth, totally restoring earth. We’ll be restored and we’ll all be rejoicing together.<sup>[300]</sup> Wonderful! But will there be any child abusers among us? (Genuine question.)

Here’s what I was taught: God is obliged to punish sin, so Jesus says, ‘OK, punish me instead.’ So then God doesn’t *need* to punish us because (to quote a popular song), ‘On the cross when Jesus died, the wrath of God was

satisfied.’ Again, I hope I’m not being too simplistic; I’m just stating the teachings I received (and promoted for 45 years).

We see all the evil that people do and we want to say, quite legitimately, ‘God should punish this sort of evil’ or ‘God should punish those sorts of evil people.’ This is how we see it, but is punishment God’s prime concern?

I think God’s prime attribute is love (God *is* love), so God’s concern is that people – all people – should be restored (although God’s will isn’t always done). So what does God do? Ask Hosea (a book worth reading, if you don’t know it): God forgives and forgives and forgives, in an effort to restore people. It’s called ‘grace’ – free forgiveness.

Sin has consequences, yes, and God wants to undo the damage we cause. God wants to (and will in the end) bring justice, but *restorative* justice, not *retributive* justice – well, that’s what I now think the Bible teaches.

If crime and punishment is high on your church’s agenda, I guess they’ll agree with the prodigal father’s elder son: it’s not FAIR to keep forgiving people. But Jesus made that parable a two-parter with good reason: he knows that we feel that non-fairness! And I’ve given<sup>[272]</sup> my view that Paul has a similar two-parter in Romans: in chapter 1, we rightly get hot under the collar about what ‘they’ do, then in chapter 2, the three fingers of our pointing hand point back at us. Ouch!

Until the church repents of its view of God as crime-and-punishment-oriented, and instead sees God as the ever-forgiving prodigal father, we’re doomed to continue inoculating people against the Good News of the love of God in Jesus.

Paul Bev. 4.12.23

## 302 Why bother praying?

Today I’m excited and daunted in equal measure. For my whole six-year journey I’ve really struggled with prayer-as-intercession. I simply can’t see the point – well, I couldn’t.

I totally get prayer-as-worship: the gospel is really, really Good News to me now, so I can’t stop thanking and praising God. Indeed, I had to give a 5-min talk to 60 Year 6 kids from the local CofE junior school about ‘Why do Christians worship?’ and that was easy-peasy. (I’ll tell you what I said, if you like.)

And I love spending time in silence with God – which is (one kind of) prayer, right? I do keep a notepad by me, so I can write down (and dismiss from mind), ‘Buy milk’; and if people come to mind, I write their names down, and pray for them after my 20/25 mins.

But I really can’t (couldn’t) see the point of praying (interceding). OK, yes, Jesus did it, and, OK, the Bible *tells* me to do it, but I’ve always struggled with the ‘Because I say so’ thing – and not just when I was a kid. ‘Why should I?!’

I *didn’t* see the point of praying, but I think I see a chink of light. Please bear with me...

Thanks to Brad Jersak,<sup>42</sup> I’m working a few things out. Jesus was ‘self-emptying’,<sup>[Phil 2]</sup> (technical term: kenosis, adj: kenotic) and he only did what he saw his father doing.<sup>[Jn 5:19]</sup> I get that. But hang on, if God is like-what-Jesus-is-like, then is God (the Father) self-emptying too? **No, I assume not: to put it crudely, he’s the Boss; God can just do what he likes, when he likes – we can’t argue.** Jersak’s not so sure. (Blue is how I used to think.)

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<sup>42</sup> A major factor is Bradley Jersak’s *A More Christlike God – A More Beautiful Gospel* – read in 2018, now re-reading.

No! God's will *is* supreme – nothing happens without his say-so, right? Jersak's not so sure, and he quotes Bishop Desmond Tutu: 'For whatever reason, since humankind showed up on the scene, God does nothing without a human partner.'<sup>43</sup> Quite a statement!

Now, how did Jesus do all his miracles? Well, he was God, so it was easy for him, right? But maybe, having self-emptied, Jesus only did miracles by *co-operating* (partnering) with his Father. And so maybe we should do the same sort of thing?

And maybe this is *three-way*? 'The Spirit intercedes for us, with sighs too deep for words.'<sup>[Rom 8:26]</sup> So I can see the Spirit as being kenotic, as Jesus was (is?) but God is more difficult. Does God the Father say, 'I'm not going to insist on my own way; I'll allow you to totally decide for yourself, and I won't interfere'? OK, suppose I need a car parking space for a very important delivery, maybe God would say, like, 'Pray to me, and we'll see what we can work out. Maybe I'll prompt you to turn down a side street.'

I'm still thinking this through, but this idea of prayer (interceding) as partnering is starting to make sense – thanks, Brad – but then it's a daunting responsibility!

Paul Bev. 11.12.23

### 303 An amazing young lady

As Protestants, we're so wary of Mariolatry that we can easily miss what an amazing lady Mary was. Against all the odds, she recognised the signs – when heaven came to earth – and said, 'Yes, I'll do my part'. She stood in the gap between heaven and earth and helped God's kingdom to come to earth.

The odds? It had been *four hundred* years since God had last spoken by the prophets, and the religious elite were always on about avoiding going to hell by what you believe and do. Mary clearly knew God's desire to restore things on earth: read her response!<sup>Lk 1:46-55</sup>

Thirty years later, in the same religious climate, Jesus stood in the gap, bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth, bringing healing, joy and forgiveness, and restoring people. And some realised that this was the Real Deal. But religion fulfilled its part in God's Big Plan by arranging Jesus' death. Yet, through his death, Jesus defeated death and secured The Way for heaven to come to earth.

And The Way (the first followers of Jesus), after his resurrection and ascension, again stood in the gap, bringing heaven's restoration to earth. And the movement spread like wildfire, despite the best efforts of organised religion.

And then? [Major overstatement warning!] For 2000 years, there's been a constant battle between God's Big Plan to bring heaven to earth and organised religion trying to control the gateway through which people could escape from earth and get to heaven.

We look back to the Reformation and applaud the break from corrupt religion. But as religion grew up around Protestantism, we lost sight of bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth. There were various revivals – which brought people into church – but a lot of it was on the back of the concept of (not) going to hell and instead going to heaven, away from the mess here on earth. (But yes, much earthly good came too: care for the poor, etc.)

And the Charismatic revival? It brought people back to church, as we rediscovered God's heavenly gifts. What for? Do you remember 'power evangelism'? God's plan seemed to be that people we would be convinced of the truth by seeing miracles happening. But it was still about 'going to heaven', more than our standing in the gap to bring heaven to earth.

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<sup>43</sup> Jersak, chapter 8.



When I started on my recent journey, I mentioned my excitement on reading, in Richard Rohr's book,<sup>44</sup> that our religion had become (under the influence of the Enlightenment?) 'propositional and transactional', instead of 'relational and mysterious.'<sup>[2,15]</sup><sup>45</sup> And I also recognised that it had become way too individualistic, following the culture of the age: it was about, 'I'm going to heaven – you can come too'.

I've come to believe that God's Big Plan (starting with Abraham) is to bring individuals to faith so that we can work together to bring heaven's restoration to earth – now, but also knowing that ultimately God will fully restore it when Jesus returns.

Paul Bev. 16.12.23

## **304 Stable + inn + manger? Wrong, try again!**

I have a friend who, like me, loves to challenge our preconceived ideas, but ONLY if it helps us – and, more importantly, those who don't yet know Jesus' love – to draw closer to the One who loves us all to the point of death. She sent me a link<sup>46</sup> about the nativity.

Classic FM has us voting for 'the nation's favourite carol', and there can be no-one, surely, of the older generation who can't associate the words, 'inn', 'stable' and 'manger'. I'm not sure about the younger generation (Radio 1?), but unless and until nativities are banned from schools, those three words are welded into our cultural understanding.

The lone voice my friend found says we've misunderstood the culture of Palestine 2000 years ago, and have mistranslated the NT Greek words: (1) houses had a main room for people *and* animals, and some also had a small spare room, a 'nin'; (2) hospitality was so encultured that Bethlehem visitors would have been given room – at all costs; (3) the 'nin' was full of guests already, so Joseph and Mary were *brought into* the main room – and *especially* so because she was pregnant. Totally *unthinkable* to do otherwise!

So bang go all those carol-service sermons about 'make room for Jesus in your heart'.

Whether this chap is right or not, can you see how totally *impossible* it would be to get people to see the nativity in that way? An absolutely massive mountain to move: films, novels, poems, songs, carols, plus centuries of art; not to mention people's own personal romantic, emotional, and family associations – no chance!

Thankfully, it's not that fundamental a distinction.

In my articles, I try always to be positive, but I believe we do have an absolutely massive mountain to move, one which is *fundamentally* important. But it's equally firmly rooted – if not more so. The positive is what I alluded to last time,<sup>[303]</sup> how Mary's 'yes' initiated God's move to bring the domain of heaven to earth; then Jesus, supremely, brought 'the kingdom of heaven' to earth; we are then tasked with bringing heaven into everyday lives on earth; and ultimately (Advent allusion) God will bring heaven to a totally restored earth.

And the absolutely massive mountain? The Christian faith has transmuted into a way in which a few ('chosen'?) people will be allowed to escape the mess of earth, away to a lovely 'heaven'; and for the rest, the prospects are not good. So our fundamental job, as Christians, is to persuade people that they too need to climb into the life raft, to escape the sinking ship (try Googling: sermon life raft).

Tom Wright (along with Desmond Tutu<sup>[302]</sup> and others) is trying to get us back to a biblical view: as a follower of Christ the King we have to be fully committed to 'thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth*'! And I guess that Jesus would agree with Tom and Desmond.

<sup>44</sup> *The Divine Dance*. Actually, the statement was in the foreword by William P. Young of *The Shack* fame.

<sup>45</sup> My son Tim recently said that those *same four words* related to his secular work on the future of education!!

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/jesus-wasnt-born-in-a-stable-and-that-makes-all-the-difference/>

## 305 God communicates, we participate

This Advent, stimulated by Jersak, Tutu and Wright,<sup>[302-4]</sup> I've seen the Christmas story anew. It's about how God communicates and, if we're willing, we participate.

*'Beloved in Christ, be it this Christmastide our care and delight to hear again the message of the angels...'*

The magi are spiritually open to new things... they participate by travelling huge distances.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are told about their first baby ('at our age?!'); I guess they had to, er, 'participate'.

Mary is told something totally mind-blowing; she participates, agrees to be 'the Lord's servant', and accepts the possibility of a mysterious conception (I'm deliberately not saying 'supernatural').

Joseph is horrified, I guess, but is listening; he has a dream, and participates by marrying her despite what people will think.

The shepherds are communicated to – big time! They participate: they abandon their charge (did they lose their jobs, for neglect?), and go to Bethlehem.

The magi are still listening and, to protect the New King, they participate, risking real trouble with Herod by heading home a different way – surely, *someone* would have noticed the huge camel train and told Herod.

Joseph is warned in a dream about Herod's plan, leaves his home, family and livelihood, and flees with Mary and Jesus to Egypt (we often gloss over this biggie – 400 miles?).

So that's the pattern I'm seeing: there are people (us?!) who need to listen to God, participate or partner with God to do amazing things – not necessarily dramatic, but still amazing – to help to make God's kingdom come.

By contrast, I used to feel I had to defend the annunciation as being miraculous: her 'supernatural' conception was God intervening. Swayed by the ancient Greeks, we make the (totally non-Jewish) distinction between 'natural' and 'supernatural', saying that God broke in and 'performed a miracle'?

So to go back to what started my journey in 2017: I now feel that faith should be more relational and mysterious, and not about propositions (statements of faith) and transactions (my agreeing to believe and so having my sins forgiven).<sup>[303]</sup>

Here's my over-stated, over-simplified before and **after**:

| <b>Propositional and transactional</b>                                                                                    | <b>Relational and mysterious</b>                                                                                                                                                 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Me going to heaven <sup>[303]</sup> – escaping from the suffering of earth                                                | Heaven coming to us on earth now, to help alleviate suffering; and ‘on that day’ ultimately and fully                                                                            |
| God intervenes in earthly affairs – ‘does miracles’ – natural/supernatural dichotomy                                      | God asks us to listen and cooperate, to sort things out – ‘miracles’ are a natural part of the mystery of God’s creation                                                         |
| A ‘cross-centred’ church = focusing on my sin and the solution that Christ brings                                         | A ‘cross-centred’ church = we are self-emptying, <sup>[302]</sup> like Jesus, giving our lives for and to others                                                                 |
| Suffering? I have to (try to!) justify how an all-powerful and all-loving God watches people suffer and yet does nothing. | Suffering? Being self-emptying, the Father creates us and then allows natural consequence. <sup>[302]</sup> But God seeks those who will participate, to help sort out the mess. |

Difficult to put a life-changing journey into so few words.

Paul Bev. 23.12.23

## 306 *But is Wright right?!*

Last night I watched the first of three 30-min episodes of *A vicar’s life*, a documentary on church life in rural Herefordshire with its ‘we are an aging congregation’ trying to be ‘relevant to young people’, and I squirmed. Yes, I know it was the media’s view, but still, I couldn’t help comparing it with the world-upside-down, first-century church.

And yes, I know, you could take me to a flourishing inner-city church with hundreds of young people, or to some of the mega-churches around the world, but I’m still worried.

So let me take you to a Wright-ism. This was quoted in a book edited by his son Oliver (NTW’s italic, my colour.):

To sum up... the work of salvation, in its full sense, is (1) about whole human beings not merely souls; (2) about the present, not simply the future; and (3) about what God does *through* us, not merely what God does *in and for* us.

I haven’t failed to notice the two merely’s and one simply, which are essential to his thesis here, but is he right, even? Let’s check it out.

For starters, surely the essential part of us *is* our souls, isn’t it? That’s what will be preserved when our bodies die, isn’t it? [I think I can see NTW’s response: ‘The body/soul dichotomy owes more to Plato and his mates in ancient Greece than to NT teaching!’]

Anyway, get any pamphlet or book on what ‘the work of salvation is about’ and I’ll bet you come away with the impression that it’s essentially about how **my** soul can be saved, so when **I** die **I** will be with God in heaven – in the **future**. Once I’m saved, I can do something useful here and now, but that’s not what salvation is ‘**about**’.

Even if we add the stuff I’ve got excited about, since the start of my journey (faith is about relationship and mystery, not propositions and a transaction), we’ve still not moved far from ‘me and my salvation’.

Back to the early church – what was the ‘good news’ then? Well, they wouldn’t have a clue about all this ‘going to heaven’ malarkey. Yes, if we die before ‘That Day’ when heaven finally and fully comes to earth, we’ll be ‘in God’s domain’; so yes, ‘heaven’ in one sense, but only as a temporary holding situation.

No, the early church was (and we should be?) mainly concerned with bringing God’s kingdom into the here and now – in anticipation of the full-and-final. That’s why Jesus told us to pray: ‘thy kingdom come’.

That gives me a different kind of nervousness: trying to insist today that ‘Jesus is Lord’ could bring us into conflict in all sorts of ways. It would certainly be safer to stick to the ‘gospel’ as I was taught it: a personal relationship with God, so I’m saved, and then I simply try to persuade friends and family to believe and be saved too.

But then maybe Wright *is* right.

Paul Bev. 30.12.23

## 307 *Two disparate threads?*

Do you believe in coincidences? Well, maybe, but the important thing is to be open: Is God trying to get my attention? So I booked a table in a small restaurant for eight editor friends for 6pm, but it’s tight as there’s a table for 10 booked for 7pm. Yesterday, we’re all chatting away, and eight of their ten arrive – all strangers to me. The final two come in, and it’s a couple I haven’t seen for 10–15 years. Two days ago, I had been talking about them, especially about the way the chap led prayers in church. My antennae are alert.

So, two disparate threads, but as they also came yesterday, again my antennae are up: one friend recommended a book and another a short video.

I’ve often mentioned that when we ‘read the Bible’ – say, we ‘read a Gospel’ – we are actually reading an English translation. This means I’m reading what has been filtered by the translators, so I have to rely, to some extent, on what someone else believes. I’m not complaining, just saying.

So this book<sup>47</sup> pointed out that even if we knew NT Greek, we would *still* not be reading the words of Jesus – not directly. He spoke Aramaic, so the Greek Gospels are *translations* of Jesus’ teachings – a totally new idea to me.

In Advent, I was thinking about bodily resurrection,<sup>[306]</sup> and about the wrong notion that just our souls will end up ‘in heaven’. No, on that Great Day, heaven will come to earth, and our bodies will be renewed. And my point here is that it was the ancient Greeks that separated humans out into body, mind and spirit/soul – a wholly unJewish way of thinking, as they had a much more holistic view. Worth bearing in mind, eh?

The focus of the book was the Lord’s prayer, the significance of which keeps coming more and more strongly to me. Let’s see what I learn about the Lord’s prayer *as Jesus actually spoke it and taught it...* in Aramaic!

The video was recommended by a friend who ministers in a very Muslim area of Britain. It featured an imam who had decided (for whatever reason) to sit down and read through his Qur’an and see what it actually said about Jesus (Isa). He is now a Christian.

I’ve only watched this short video<sup>48</sup> once so far, but I imagine that this chap felt a little like the folks in one of my favourite verses: ‘Didn’t our hearts burn within us as he... opened the Scriptures to us?’<sup>Luke 24:32</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Prayers of the Cosmos* Neil Douglas-Klotz, 1990

<sup>48</sup> <https://bit.ly/47nbHGQ>

My personal view is that the writers of the Old and New Testaments were fallible humans, but that God inspired them to write words that would then inspire later generations to know, love, praise and serve our heavenly Father. And it sounds to me as if God has done the same sort of thing with the Qur'an – using any and every opportunity to make that wonderful love available to all. Praise Jesus' name!

Paul Bev. 9.1.24

## 308 God is a realist

It must be really, really frustrating being God. You try to point people in the right direction, and they (we!) think of a host of inventive ways to get it wrong – see below.

And the other thing is, You try to teach people something, and they (I!) say, 'Ah, I've got it now' but they (I) so quickly forget. For example, today, I wanted to repeat-quote Desmond Tutu:<sup>[303]</sup> '*For whatever reason, since humankind showed up on the scene, God does nothing without a human partner,*' so I looked it up in my all-my-articles file. It seems I *had already quoted it* in an article **five** years ago, where I said '**Now** I know why I should intercede.' And last month I '*discovered*' (again!) why I ought to intercede. Argh!

So, given Tutu's principle, how does God operate? Well, we do what we think is right, get it badly wrong, and yet God uses our fumbling, messed-up efforts in order to help people, bless people, reduce suffering, and increase the quality of our relationships – with each other and with God.

Given how hopeless I am at putting my own 'discoveries' into practice, what do I think I've discovered these past few wonderful years?!

Centrally, it's that humans desperately need community, at every level – personal to global. Individually, the biggest contributor to mental ill-health is loneliness, and globally, if we don't learn to accept that different countries and cultures see life differently, and learn to work together as a community of nations, humankind simply won't survive. I reckon God is very concerned about this and will work with us in any way possible.

And what can I do? What can my church do? What is God's priority? I used to think it was about 'saving souls'; I didn't verbalise it, but I guess it was about rescuing people, so that as many as possible went to heaven. And, given the general lowering of moral standards, we also need to help people know what God's moral rules are.

By contrast, I guess my main concern now is along the lines of the Lord's prayer: building God's kingdom *now*, people (everyone) having enough to eat, and everyone forgiving one another.

With my former approach, we Christians were the ones with the answers, and our job was to persuade others to follow our lead. Now, however, it's much more about working with anyone and everyone, learning from each other, and together sorting out the mess.

Sounds like I've gone all 'love is all you need', and forgotten about Jesus dying for our sins. Not at all! Jesus' life, death and resurrection are central to all I believe and do; it's what gives me energy to keep going. But that's how I, personally, relate to God and to those who share my faith; and to those who don't, I relate on the basis that we need to work together to build community – at every level.

Paul Bev. 20.1.24

## 309 “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”

Studying the book I mentioned<sup>[307]</sup> about the Lord’s Prayer,<sup>49</sup> I’m finding it very broadening to read about the Aramaic words that Jesus actually spoke, as opposed to the (English translation of the) Greek translation of those words.

After my last musings,<sup>[308]</sup> something suddenly stuck me: we’ve got the gospel totally the wrong way round; yet our Loving Father has still used our fumbling, messed-up version to draw millions of people to know his wonderful love.

But think how many *more millions* would come to Christ if we turned the good news back the right way round – the Lord’s Prayer way round! (Love → sin, not sin → love.)

- Start with God: the wonderful loving, prodigal father that Jesus preached about.
- Then the kingdom (come!): people celebrating God’s reign of love.
- Then the survival of human kind (daily bread): we can (only) survive if we help one another (globally).
- Forgiveness: we can (only) survive if we learn to forgive one another.
- Strength to carry on: for when we’re tempted to give up.
- Fighting together against evil: including institutional evil.
- It all revolves around Christ the king: his power, his kingdom and his glory.

I guess that’s more *why* we need the gospel; the *how* is the story of Jesus, as related in the Gospels.

But why do I say it’s the wrong way round? Jesus never ever taught about God taking (some) people FROM earth to heaven – but that’s exactly what the church has taught for the past few centuries – no, it’s about bringing Christ’s kingdom TO earth.

OK, millions of people have got (and still do get) drawn to know God’s love through that totally wrong view, but at what cost to people who – quite reasonably – have rejected it?

This wrong view is epitomised by Jonathan Edwards’ famous 1741 sermon, as per my title, which is said to be the start of ‘The Great Awakening’ – millions of people coming to faith. This Wikipedia quote<sup>50</sup> makes the wrong-way-roundness clear, I think (my bold):

Three teachings that Methodists saw as **the foundation of Christian faith** were:

People are all, by nature, “dead in sin”.

They are “justified by faith alone”.

Faith produces inward and outward holiness.

I’d rather concentrate on the positive, but putting the negative alongside can sometimes be helpful. The following contains some gross generalisations and is not properly thought out but let’s concentrate on the vision of how a new ‘General Awakening’ might be more like what Jesus preached:

| From...                                     | To...                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Saving souls away to heaven                 | Building the kingdom, now                                                 |
| Ruled by fear (shame, punishment, wrath)    | Ruled by love (restoration, adoption, forgiveness, grace)                 |
| ‘Are you in or out?!’ (isolation, religion) | ‘You belong!’ (community, communion)                                      |
| Worthlessness (original sin, shame)         | Supreme value (original goodness, God says: ‘I’m especially fond of you’) |

<sup>49</sup> *Prayers of the Cosmos* Neil Douglas-Klotz, 1990

<sup>50</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First\\_Great\\_Awakening](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Great_Awakening)

|                                                               |                                                                                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Focus on moral rules<br>(what we <b>do</b> , <i>‘doing’</i> ) | Focus on building faithful relationships<br>(who we <b>are</b> , <i>‘being’</i> ) |
| Bible interpretation is fixed (‘letter’)                      | Bible speaks, from age to age (‘spirit’/Spirit)                                   |
| Obedience                                                     | Faith-full questioning                                                            |
| Preaching at people                                           | Listening to people                                                               |

Happy to chat about this.

Paul Bev. 23.1.24

## 310 Is your church all right?

When Sue was in a group that created biblical-themed quilts, we used to exhibit them in churches around the country, but at the Sunday services, I wondered if those churches would still exist in 10/20 years. At 60-odd, our presence reduced the average age rather.

So is your church all right, I wonder? Will it continue to exist?

Maybe your church is like the ‘lively’ church we joined when we moved to Norwich in 1980? Our faith was encouraged: surrounded by loads of people singing wholeheartedly, I specifically remember feeling: ‘This has made me realise we’re on the winning side!’

It was a big church that attracted people from miles around, and families especially liked that children were catered for. We appreciated the really good teaching – sermons of 20+ mins. We did have quite a high turnover, but we saw that as training people up and sending them out to serve the Lord elsewhere. (We were there for 37 years.)

Now the Anglican church is parish-based – the official policy is that an Anglican vicar has ‘the cure of souls’ for the parish. However, hardly any of the congregation actually lived in the parish, which caused a tension. The people we could ‘reach’ were friends, family and work colleagues, but they might live even further away from the church. And we had very little contact with the people in the parish – it was a group of like-minded people, not a community church.

When we moved house and changed church, we both felt immediately at home in this small medieval church. We said, ‘It’s such a welcoming church’, and talking to others, everyone seemed to say the same. We all live locally (or some have family who do), so it’s very much a community-based church. And some people in the area who don’t come to (many) services still feel it’s ‘their church’, and help with our community events.

Having lost my faith totally, and tried to rebuild it at our old church, I still had questions – many questions. Talking about God with some in our new church made me realise that there’s a wide range of views, a broad spectrum of churchmanship, and I have found this liberating and faith-enhancing – hence all these articles.

So, is your church *‘all right’*? What is important to your church leadership (to you as a church leader)? For example, I’ve known independent local churches that have split over whether women should be in leadership – indeed, when my old church needed a new vicar, we said (and I was on the PCC at the time) that we wouldn’t invite women to apply.

Yes, I’m a radical; yes, I challenge people to go back to the Bible and consider whether you should just accept what your church (local or national) teaches. So am I right now? No, I’m pretty sure that I’m wrong in various ways, but I (we) try to prioritise relationships, rather than getting your theology *all ‘right’*.

Paul Bev. 11.2.24

## 311 Community rules OK?

I'm not here to criticise anyone's church experience, but I am here to think, to learn and hopefully to change, to improve, to grow closer to how God wants me/us to be.

Last time, I reported my huge encouragement<sup>[310]</sup> on moving to Norwich and attending a church where it was clear that we all wanted to 'spread the gospel'. In our previous home, where our two boys were born, there was one Anglican and one Methodist church, and that was it – without driving miles. Before that we had been in Kenya, where the local church was Kikuyu-speaking, and we sometimes drove 60 miles each way to Nairobi to attend the lively Baptist church! So in Norwich we chose a good church and then a house nearby.

So how has my thinking changed, since our latest church move? My faith revival started with Richard Rohr's *The Divine Dance*, and his insistence on relationship being central to faith – God *is* relationship. In my very first article,<sup>[0]</sup> I explained how I had repeatedly found God's love... and then lost it again; this time I wouldn't let it go!

Looking back on seven years(!) of my articles, I can see mention of 'relationship' moving more towards an insistence on 'community'. And I've had some wonderful chats with my non-church-going educational-consultant son on this. We agree 100% that unless, as a society – indeed, as a world – we rediscover community we are doomed.

Contrasting the three churches above, the first had community, but (as I would have said then) I had to fight against part of the church in order to promote the gospel. In the second we were all like-minded, and Christians came from miles around to share that agreement, and promote that gospel.

So how has my thinking about the gospel changed? How does our understanding of the gospel *need* to change, if we are... I was going to write 'to survive',<sup>[310]</sup> but is that my aim simply for the church to 'survive'?! I should be saying: How do we need to change to help our community by showing Christ as Lord?

How 'wide' is your faith? For me, it used to be about my own personal salvation, and then persuading others to receive personal salvation – not about saving the world.

If the gospel is to actually make a difference, the church needs to change. Thankfully, it has changed by accepting that we shouldn't exclude women from leadership; that nearly split the church. It took a lot of studying the Bible and debating, but it also needed a lot of being honest about our *feelings*. When we are trying to objectively interpret the Bible, our *feelings* are surprisingly powerful at affecting our sight.

So, yes, I want us to check our *feelings* very carefully, and not let them rule when we consider the current issue that's threatening to split the church. Personally, I feel that we should allow gay Christians to follow their own consciences, before God, and not insist that *our* interpretation of Scripture is 'right' – and let community rule.

Paul Bev. 13.2.24

## 312 Love and wrath?

I was never one to accept the parental, 'Because I say so': I wanted to know 'Why?!' From an early age, I would take things apart to find out how they worked. So I guess it's part of my nature, and that's what has driven my seven-year search: How does God 'work'?

In my life, I've had success at some things, as a result of applying a literal, logical, mechanical approach, but if I were to try to apply that literal, logical, mechanical approach (LLM) to my relationship with Sue, I doubt it would work too well, and I have now come to believe that my LLM approach to God is also not over-helpful.



But that LLM approach fits well with the view I subscribed to for almost 50 years: I have sinned, I deserve God's punishment, but God loves us, and so he allowed Jesus to be punished in our place; we then can be declared 'Not guilty' and can live in freedom:

'On the cross when Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied.' It may be LLM, but I no longer find that view helpful in my relationship with God.

The particular 'why-problem' I have been facing these past few years is understanding God's wrath, and I have concluded that the best approach is to start from Jesus' teaching about God's love, and work backwards to try to understand wrath.

For me, the pinnacle has to be the outrageous, prodigal, unreasonable love as portrayed in Luke 15 – it's just not LLM! Here's how Brad Jersak<sup>51</sup> pictures it (my italic):

The father *consents* to the son's stubborn defiance and selfish recklessness. In love, God lets him leave and *gives him over to the wrath of sin*. Then, when the son bottoms out, wakes up and heads home – when he *consents* to the father's way – the father welcomes him home with great joy and without shame. The party resumes!

This begins to point to where I'm headed – the elements of consent and wrath. But the father's attitude is totally unreasonable and unfair – ask the elder son!

Then there's the prodigal farmer: Jesus' hearers would know perfectly well that no LLM farmer would fling his seeds willy-nilly all over the place – even onto the path?! No, he would plant the seeds *in the good soil* – but God's love is *prodigal*, not LLM.

Having started to think like this, if you look back to the OT, you see for example how God, in his wrath, says, 'I ... am a jealous God, *punishing the children for the sin of the parents* to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me'. A purely literal, logical and mechanical approach points to an actively punishing God.

I think we have to start from Jesus' view of the loving, prodigal Father, and see God as 'punishing' by consenting to our waywardness. God's wrath is then a passive giving-us-over – as in Romans 1 – to the natural results of our wrong choices.

Paul Bev. 22.2.24

## **313 Love and wrath – Part 2**

Last time, I looked at how my faith had moved from a more literal, logical, mechanical approach (LLM) to being more relationship-based; today, that idea is growing in my mind.

Would it be fair to say that life is *about* relationships? Can we say that faith in God is *about* relationships? Certainly, coming from a dysfunctional family, I have always tended to be more LLM, so let's look at a specific issue, and view it as LLM or relationally.

Peter and Julia (not their real names) were missionaries, but while they were serving aboard, things went very sour, and today they won't have anything at all to do with the church – any church! Question: are they still saved or not? Is that a valid question, even? To me that question is rather LLM, so let's see it more relationally. Does God still love them? Of course! God will never stop loving them! And that's what matters. Period.

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<sup>51</sup> As I've struggled with the wrath of God, especially as depicted in the Old Testament, I have been helped greatly by Brad Jersak's *A More Christ-like God* and Greg Boyd's *Cross Vision*.

Second issue: in the OT, we read how Israel (repeatedly) turned away from God, things went horribly wrong, the prophets spoke, the people turned back, and things improved. How do we view that in terms of their relationship with God? The OT authors speak of God punishing them for their sin, but neither Jersak nor Boyd<sup>52</sup> read that in a purely literal way.

Yes, in Abraham's time, people thought of the gods as capriciously causing calamity, and so at least it's a step in the right direction to see Jahweh as bringing hardship, but only to jolt the people to their senses, so they will turn back to God's way again.

As I read through the OT, I see a changing view of God – becoming more relational and less LLM. And God wonderfully inspires the authors to write things like how the steadfast (covenant) love of the Lord never fails, His mercies never come to an end. I pointed<sup>[312]</sup> to God 'punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation' but it is followed by God 'showing love to a *thousand* generations of those who love me'.

The underlying theme of relationship is there, albeit masked at times, as the authors' view of God changes over the centuries. Thankfully, with the cross and resurrection, our view of God has changed further, so we need to read the OT with eyes wider open to the love of God and to see things more metaphorically. I see it now more 'as if God were punishing...'

'OK,' I used to reason, 'some things in the OT *are* metaphorical – we know that God doesn't *literally* ride on the wings of the wind – but how do we know whether a given passage is metaphorical or not?'

But again, just asking that question shows my LLM attitude: I was asking for a definite decision, i.e. either something *is* metaphorical or it isn't. But relationships are not binary.

(Next time, I'll look at where Jersak and Boyd actually disagree!)

Paul Bev. 24.2.24

## 314 Love and wrath – Part 3

On the basis of Jesus' teaching about his heavenly Father, I find it difficult to see 'wrath' as God literally punishing people. Maybe we need to read our Bibles more relationally and less in literal, logical, mechanical (LLM) ways; as Jesus says, 'Do you think the eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, but you need to repent.'<sup>Luke 13:4</sup> Stop thinking literally, 'God punishes sinners'; instead think, 'I need to (constantly) turn back to God.'

To take an almost random OT example, how do we read this verse? *Therefore the Lord rejected all the people of Israel; he afflicted them and gave them into the hands of plunderers (Babylon), until he thrust them from his presence.*<sup>2 Kings 17:20</sup> Is this a literal, mechanical account of 'what God did'? Does that view fit with the character of the prodigal father as portrayed (and mirrored in his life) by Jesus?

Jersak and Boyd both see God's wrath more in line with Paul's view: God *gives people over* to the *consequences* of their own sin.<sup>Romans 1</sup> As Jersak says:<sup>53</sup>

God doesn't actively investigate, arrest, convict sentence and punish sinners. There's no need and, in fact, that's not God's heart at all. Here's the bottom line: sin carries its own penalty. This is what Boyd means by saying wrath is organic or intrinsic.

They agree on that, but then – at least according to Jersak – they begin to differ. As I understand it, Boyd says that, as Israel goes on sinning, God eventually decides that enough is enough and, to teach them that sin is a really bad

<sup>52</sup> Brad Jersak *A More Christ-like God* and Greg Boyd *Cross Vision*.

<sup>53</sup> Brad Jersak *A More Christ-like God* p195f.

idea, withdraws his protection. So, in my OT verse above, God didn't actively *send* Babylon to punish them; rather he stepped back and *allowed* Babylon to take them into captivity. That feels a lot more like a prodigal father's action. But Jersak disagrees:

Boyd describes the process this way: God in his patience allows sin to go on and on. His mercy continues until he must finally withdraw it. Finally, God pulls back his mercy and gives us over to our self-destructive stubbornness.

As Jersak sees it, this implies that God decides *sometimes* to protect and sometimes *not*. Really? If a loving father *can* protect his child, would he sometimes *not* protect his child? I'm torn between Boyd and Jersak.

Stupid boy! I'm using LLM principles again to try to 'understand' how God works! Maybe I should just use the Tutu principle?<sup>54</sup> If we cooperate with God, maybe we can protect each other (to some extent) from the forces and effects of evil. In other words, perhaps if Israel had prayed and cooperated with God, together could they have resisted Babylon's attacks?

The Bible is adamant about God's faithful, covenant love and mercy, so let's keep turning back to God, keep repenting, keep loving. Maybe even pray for our enemies – 'those evil people' whom we tend to think God *ought* to punish?

Paul Bev. 27.2.24

## 315 Love and wrath: a short PS

*Again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go and take a census of Israel and Judah."*<sup>2 Sam 24:1</sup>

God specifically says to David, 'Go and take a census'. So David tells his commanders to go throughout the land and count the men. But his ADC, Joab, is horrified: they are supposed to be relying on God for victory, not on the size of the army!

After the count, David realises his error, and repents before the LORD. But, instead of forgiving David, God gives him three choices: three years of famine in Israel, three months of David having to flee his enemies, or three days of plague on the land.<sup>v13</sup>

David chooses the last: *So the LORD sent a plague on Israel... and seventy thousand people died.*<sup>v16</sup>

That seems pretty clear to me: God tells David to do something (count his troops) and then, when he does so, as a punishment, God kills 70,000 people. What?!

But hang on (and it's Brad Jersak<sup>p202</sup> who tipped me off), the exact same incident is also recorded in 1 Chron 21, where it says: *Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel.*<sup>v1</sup> So, who *actually* incited David? God or Satan?

If I had been with Jesus as he sat in the synagogue discussing the Bible (OT) with his fellow Jews, I would have asked, how does he square 2 Sam 24 with his teaching about God as his loving, forgiving father?

After wrestling long and hard with this sort of issue, I have concluded that, while the authors were definitely inspired, they weren't infallible. They were creatures of their time and their view of God was, at times, distorted.

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<sup>54</sup> Desmond Tutu:<sup>[303]</sup> 'For whatever reason, since humankind showed up on the scene, God does nothing without a human partner.'

On the Tutu principle, God cooperates with fallible humans to bring about his purposes, so he inspired people to write the Bible, and inspired their content. For example, look back to that very chapter:

Realising his folly, David says, *'Let us fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is great.'*<sup>v14</sup>

*The LORD felt very sorry about the terrible things that had happened. He said to the Angel who was destroying the people 'Enough! Withdraw your hand!'*<sup>v16</sup>

Throughout the Old Testament we are pointed towards God's love and mercy, and God's Great Plan is there for all to see. Praise God's name!

Paul Bev. 3.3.24

## 316 Lent – negative or positive?

At church on the first Sunday in Lent, I suddenly realised that I'd missed that it *was* Lent! Then I thought: 'What's Lent for, anyway?!' so I asked Wikipedia:

The purpose of Lent is the preparation of the believer for Easter through prayer, mortifying the flesh, repentance of sins, almsgiving, simple living, and self-denial.

I read further, 'Prior to the 6th century, Lent was normatively observed through fasting, with the allowance of a vegetarian meal after sunset.' Like Ramadan! Wikipedia again:

Ramadan is a time of spiritual reflection, self-improvement, and heightened devotion and worship ... In addition to abstaining from eating and drinking during this time, Muslims abstain from sexual relations and sinful speech and behaviour.

Interesting! But reading the Lent article made me feel quite negative about the whole thing, especially 'mortifying the flesh and repentance of sins'. Don't we do enough repenting of our sins throughout the rest of the year? Doesn't every single service include focusing on our sin and seeking forgiveness, yet again?! Sure, I can be selfish, lazy and self-indulgent with the best of them, but am I unrealistic in not seeing my manifold sins and wickedness?

I am encouraged though that, in the past few years, I've heard more Christians saying that they are using Lent to *take up* something positive. Couldn't we make it more a time to repent, yes, but in the original, positive, *metanoia* sense: turning back to God, i.e. focusing more on God and less on me?

What is Lent, anyway? (Historians, does Ramadan have similar origins, perhaps?) It's about Jesus' time in the wilderness, so what was that about? Jesus was tempted to think about his *own* food, his *own* status, and seeing the world as *his* possession. Instead, he focused on playing his part in God's great positive plan to bring God's kingdom to earth.

In so much of my thinking, I keep coming back to the Lord's prayer. It starts with God, it starts with the kingdom, and it talks about OUR daily bread, then it seeks forgiveness for OUR sins. But I think Christianity has become horribly 'self'-centred: about me and my salvation. We're supposed to be here to build God's kingdom, so maybe that's what we should be concentrating on during Lent, rather than endless introspection?

Sorry if I've slipped into grumpy old man mode, but imagine what schools and colleges would be like if educationalists focused, as much as we do, on the negatives of personal failings! (My Tim, an educational consultant, seems to focus a lot on team-building.)

Yes, we have to recognise that the world is in a mess (caused by *our* sin), but let's be sure to remind each other what beautiful and wonderful creations we are, and how God overflows with love for us all, and how we can sort things out if we focus on working together to build God's kingdom.

Wishing you a positive Lent,

Paul Bev. 7.3.24

## **317 The good news announced – God's great plan**

What I've written here – right or wrong – is how I see God's overall picture/plan/timeline, for bringing God's kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven.

*Prehistory to Abraham et al.* – God inspires people, through story and oral tradition, to abandon the idea of gods living up mountains hurling thunderbolts willy-nilly and see the One God seeking to come and live with us in the place God created for that very purpose.

*Up to 400BC* – God inspired writers to know and communicate a God of love wanting to live with us; God seeded words, phrases, ideas in their texts which people would later recognise as predictions of the gospel story.

*BC/AD God came* – It happened, here on earth, real events: incarnation, birth, growth, living, teaching, healing, announcing the kingdom, terrible death, resurrection, ascension.

*Early years* – The good news is announced, God's kingdom has come, passed orally, enacted in real lives, suffering comes, the gospel (the story of what actually happened) spreads like wildfire, they follow Jesus' method of using parables, metaphors to help people understand and appreciate: lost/found, redemption, healing, rescue from slavery (exodus), atoning sacrifice, etc., thus Jesus' oral tradition continues.

*Early decades* – Problems begin, as individuals and groups develop ideas contrary to Jesus' teachings, so God inspires letters to be written to point people back to Jesus' way, eventually accounts of what happened are written down (the Gospels) by a few people.

*Early centuries* – Some people try to move ideas away from Jesus' teaching, so church leaders decide which letters and which written accounts should be trusted, and they also write careful statements of belief (the creeds).

*Centuries roll by* – People like me begin to say, 'Yes, but exactly *how* does Jesus' death and resurrection *work*?' and so theologians develop atonement theories: C2 Irenaeus (recapitulation), C3 Origen (ransom), C11 Anselm (satisfaction), C12 Abelard (moral influence), C16 Calvin (penal substitution).

*Jump to C21* – We need a new vicar so, for people interested, we on the PCC write that the person must be someone who 'keeps the penal substitutionary death of Christ and his resurrection at the centre of his/her theology and ministry.' (I agreed to these words, drafted by a theologically trained lay member; I had no clue then what they meant.)

'The gospel' has become: 'You're a sinner, you deserve God's punishment, Jesus took the punishment instead of you, you can now be free', i.e. penal substitution.

In C1, an evangelist was someone good at communicating the gospel, i.e. telling the story of what actually happened. In C21, an evangelist is someone who is good at persuading people to believe in one particular atonement theory.

An over-simplification, yes, but I hope it might help.

Paul Bev. 10.3.24

## ***318 Christian witness in a multi-faith society***

I'm going to take as read the first stage of any Christian witness: being a Jesus-like person, doing Jesus-like things – listening, loving and caring to the point of self-sacrifice. But what if we are asked to talk about our faith? Today's thoughts came when I was asked to pray for an overseas student meal, to include a talk about Easter.

Personally, I'd tell them the gospel – no, I mean *the* gospel, the story of what happened. Let me try...

In the best of worlds, religion should help people to live better lives, cope with difficulty and care for one another, especially those less fortunate. Sadly, we manage to mess things up, and while many good things have been done in the name of religion, some really terrible things have also been done over the millennia. But let me just explain how the Christian faith started.

It was based around the teachings of a man called Jesus, who lived in Nazareth, 90 miles north of Jerusalem. He was brought up in the Jewish religion, which had already been practised for well over 1000 years. He based his teaching on the Jewish holy books, but sadly the Jewish leaders of the time had added all sorts of rules and regulations, which tended to make people feel excluded, rather than helping them to live better lives.

His teaching seemed to polarise people: many loved his way of life and his teaching, but others – mainly the stricter Jewish leaders – felt he was speaking against their religion. It all came to a head and, by working with the Roman rulers, they managed to have him executed. Now the Romans used a particularly nasty, humiliating and degrading form of execution: publicly tying people – or even nailing them – to a wooden cross.

His followers were demoralised, but then rumours started to spread, that Jesus had come back to life. Within a few weeks, people were claiming openly and publicly that they had seen him, talked to him and even eaten food with him. And then again, a few weeks later, they said he had disappeared!

If I'd heard that, I'd have been pretty sceptical, but they went on insisting that this showed that Jesus' teaching and way of life was the fulfilment of the Jewish teaching.

The Romans didn't like such mass movements, and they knew how to deal with things they didn't like: many of Jesus' followers lost their lives. Others fled to the surrounding areas, but they continued to tell people the good news about Jesus, and this wasn't just Jews; non-Jews were drawn into the movement, too. And, over the years, it spread throughout the Roman Empire.

That's the good news. The bad news is that the movement got turned into a religion with its own rules and regulations, but when and where people have gone back to Jesus' teaching, lives have been changed for the better. And that's how we try to live our lives.

Paul Bev. 16.3.24

## ***319 ...with whom I am well pleased***

Prompted by Brad Jersak's *A More Christlike God*, I determined to investigate what he calls the 'constellation of biblical metaphors' used to help us appreciate Jesus' mission. So when I woke this morning and lay there starting to

plan this, the first that came to mind was adoption. Being a words-based person, I searched my *NTtext* file for ‘adopt’:

Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.<sup>Rom 8:23</sup>

Wow, what a start! We could have a series of 500-word articles on that one verse. (We must remember that ‘son’ had a special meaning in Paul’s day – one indicating status – but I’ll use ‘offspring’.) So this is how God views you: ‘*This is my offspring, whom I love...*’

But hang on, that was addressed to Jesus. How dare I suggest that this applies to me? But are we *not* God’s offspring? Did God *not* create us? Does God *not* love us unconditionally?

‘...with whom I am well pleased.’ Now that’s where the parallel must stop, surely? It’s drilled into us, every single service we attend, that we are ‘not worthy to gather up the crumbs under your table’.<sup>55</sup> You see how that came *instantly* to my Christian memory! I recited that in every single Communion service I attended when I came to faith 56 years ago. But was I ever told, ‘*Paul, you are my offspring, whom I love...*’? Not really.

As I explained in my very first article,<sup>[0]</sup> coming from a dysfunctional family, it was feeling God’s love (expressed through a community of Christians in Yorkshire) that drew me in – I felt adopted. Wonderful! But my life has been a series of losing and refinding that love: ’68, ’86, ’94 (totally lost faith in 2011) and, most wonderfully, I refound God’s love in 2017.

And you? Do you really believe, in your heart of hearts, that God loves you? Great!! Or has your Christian memory been so drilled – brain-washed, even – into seeing yourself as a miserable sinner that you can’t hear God saying, ‘...with whom I am well pleased’?

At 400 words, this article isn’t finished, but I’m stopping. Until I was willing to believe that God really *is* well pleased with me, I couldn’t truly flourish – I can now!

Thank you, loving Lord!

Paul Bev. 18.3.24

## **320 Communicating God’s way**

*(Historians beware – this is simplistic, but maybe there’s a thread of truth here?)*

My starting assumption is that God loves us, and wants to communicate that love – *to* us and *through* us – so how does God do that?

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets *at many times and in various ways*, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...<sup>Heb 1:1,2</sup>

God uses many and various ways, through fallible humans, but supremely he uses one specific human – his life and teaching. That’s God’s way of communicating, right?

Evil powers always work against God’s way: Roman and Jewish powers killed Jesus – that should stop it! But God’s supreme coup: Jesus triumphed through sacrifice. Brilliant!

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<sup>55</sup> I do believe that we’re not worthy, but I guess I never really believed about ‘our manifold sins and wickedness, which we, from time to time, most grievously have committed, by thought, word, and deed, against thy Divine Majesty, provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against.’ Sorry, but I was indoctrinated!

When the early followers of Jesus' way realised what had happened ('Did not our hearts burn within us as he opened the Scriptures!' Lk 24:32), the love and life of Jesus spread like wildfire. The communication method? People recounted the story of Jesus (= 'the gospel'), sometimes using verses from the OT; the clinching evidence was the life and love of the people of The Way.

Evil powers tried to stop it through fear: the Romans killed hundreds of followers, but God used that awful evil to spread The Way throughout the Roman empire. Brilliant!

Next ploy? Jesus' followers probably rejoiced when Emperor Constantine came to faith, but then maybe people 'converted' through fear?

Other ploys? Because people feared hell, rich people were willing to pay huge amounts of 'insurance' money. The church got richer and more powerful, and power corrupts.

The Reformation: people got back to more like the original teachings of Jesus, and The Way spread through people's life and love. Brilliant!

And also through the great revivals, too – but was there a large element of fear?

One recurring ploy: Christians argued as to exactly which church was right, and they used fear, force and even violence to make their 'right' views prevail.

From the best of motives, Christians saw colonisation as a chance to spread the message of Jesus globally. Evil's ploy was to use power and fear to bring conversion and, by imposing Western cultural forms onto local communities, they gave false ideas of Jesus' teachings.

With the Enlightenment, thinking people stopped believing all the apparently unscientific stuff in the Bible. Next ploy: church leaders imposed their 'right' view: e.g. if the Bible says God created the world in seven days, that's what happened – believe it or you're risking hell!

Another ploy: Christians study their Bibles and come up with carefully argued statements about exactly *how* God works, *how* people are saved: 'systematic theology' deflects people from the simple story of Jesus. Intellectual fear and power turn people from The Way.

Today? If we welcome people, if we lay down our lives for them, if we tell them the simple story of Jesus (the gospel), and stop trying to tell them 'what's right', we'll be communicating God's way – The Way of Jesus.

Paul Bev. 29.3.24

## ***321 Words are slippery customers***

Working as an editor for the past 18 years has given me a better understanding of language and communication. My aim as an editor is to help the author(s) communicate with the readers without misunderstanding – more difficult than people perhaps realise.

For me, it was technical information, but how much more important is our choice of words when we're trying to communicate how people can know God!

For example, as I've said before, 'righteous(ness)' is a very slippery customer. If we take the OED's definition of 'the quality of being morally right or justifiable', and read into Bible verses, we can cause real misunderstanding. So, recently, I looked up where Jesus used 'righteous(ness)' – well, no, I suppose he used an *Aramaic* word (or did



he use the *Hebrew* sometimes?); then the Gospel writers used a *Greek* word, and then our scholars gave us an *English* word. Here's Jesus' first recorded use (+ NT Wright's translation): <sup>Mt 3:15</sup>

'It is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.'

'This is the right way for us to complete God's whole saving plan.'

Do you see the problem? To help us to understand what God wants to communicate to us, NTW has had to use other words; indeed, he rarely uses 'righteous(ness)' in his translation. Communicating across languages is very difficult; and it is across cultures, too – let me illustrate.

To keep costs down, many publishers use colleagues in India to manage the production of books so, as English-speaking editors, we have to send emails back and forth to colleagues living and working in India. They are English-speaking, yes, but in a very different culture. Sometimes, the actual English expressions they use can sound quite rude. Thankfully, I realise that it's a (potential) cultural misunderstanding. It's a bit like Jesus saying, '*Woman, why do you involve me?*'<sup>Jn 2:4</sup> We might think, 'That's no way to speak to your mother!'

But from the *relationships* involved, we know that neither Jesus nor my Indian colleagues were being rude.

The possible causes of miscommunication then are (1) multiple languages (Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek and English), (2) the culture of a different time (2000 years ago), and (3) the culture of a different place. So if anyone is ever tempted to say, 'That's what the (English) Bible plainly says, so that's what it means, so that sorts it', then I believe they are ignoring the reality of language miscommunication. No, we need to be more humble in our translation and interpretation.

The litmus test for me is whether my 'understanding' of the Scriptures will build up people's relationships with God and with other people. And I have in mind two contentious issues: We have changed our former view that, 'the Bible clearly teaches that only men should lead churches' – well, changed to some extent! So, before we split our churches and alienate people (inside and outside the church) over gay marriage, we need to ask: How/what does God want to communicate to gay people, and about gay people, in C21?

Paul Bev. 3.4.24

## **322 How does God communicate?**

It doesn't seem a sensible plan to me but, despite knowing our propensity to get things wrong, God uses the Tutu principle: God works *with* humans to communicate his amazing love and his wonderful plan to rescue and restore the world through his son Jesus.

In pre-Jesus times, God inspired people, as they enacted that saving plan. Most significantly this included the Exodus, which became a central theme illustrating God's plan. God's people didn't always do things the way God hoped, but God never gave up.

God inspired people to remember – an important principle in our relationship with God – and so God inspired people to write stuff down. They had limited world knowledge and an un-Jesus-like view of God (not their fault!), but God inspired them.

The culmination of the Tutu principle was the ultimate human, through whom God fulfilled the OT scriptures. Then, after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, God inspired people to see that what had just happened was already there, as inspired predictions, in the OT.

As the good news of the story of Jesus spread, people remembered and passed on the story in the various languages of the time. Eventually, God inspired a few people to write it down in Greek – a good language to choose, I imagine, because of its wide use.

As in pre-Jesus times, people went off in various wrong directions, so God inspired people to write letters to help them remember and to apply the things Jesus taught.

As I've said before, it doesn't worry me that both OT and NT may contain factual errors – certainly pre-scientific ideas, but also geographical errors. And they also reflect the writers' cultural views – ideas that God might want to improve on, such as their acceptance of slavery and their strongly patriarchal attitudes. (Jesus tried to subvert the latter, but it's still a problem 2000 years on!)

For the past 2000 years, God has inspired people to communicate the story of Jesus and to lead people in the way of Jesus – despite our best, inventive ways of getting it wrong! Of course, we should do our best *not* to get it wrong, but one of the most destructive ploys has been to focus so strongly on what *we think is right* that we forget to be humble in our efforts at translation and interpretation.

Yes, God inspires those efforts, but we're still, like the authors of the biblical books, fallible human beings with limited knowledge. And we still need to accept that science – and these days, archaeology too – must be allowed to challenge our long-held views.

And again, with my editor's hat on, I'll put in a plea to remember that language changes, so the actual words we use *have to change*, otherwise we risk miscommunicating – and I've illustrated aspects of that in various articles. So, especially those of us in the older generation need to humbly check our use of language, and maybe avoid quoting 400-year-old language, especially on issues where we hold strong views.

Paul Bev. 6.4.24

## 323 How God communicates II

When I first came to faith, over 50 years ago, a vicar-type chap I met at a Christian holiday venue said something I remember to this day. I told him that I'd seen the quality of life of Christians, and heard the story of Jesus and it seemed to make sense but it depended on the Bible – and how could I know *that* was true?

His response was that I should look at the *nature of the God* that the Bible portrays. Would such a loving God provide us with an unreliable document on which to base our faith?!

Although that is actually a circular argument(!), it certainly helped me because it pointed me to seeing things *relationally*. It's not about proving whether **something** is true, but about knowing that **someone** is true. And you don't know that by analysing the Bible, rather by spending time with Jesus, the **person** we meet throughout the Bible.

Then I started at Cambridge, joined the CU, and was soon warned about these 'liberal Christians', people who 'don't take the Bible seriously'. We, the CU, had to defend the truth of the biblical faith against this attack! The Bible is infallible and inerrant!

In my second year, I was shown that the Bible clearly teaches that the gifts of the Spirit (especially tongues and prophecy) were given *only for the early church*, before the *written word* was available: tongues is not real, and 'prophecy' actually means expounding and applying Scripture by preaching. That's what the Bible clearly teaches, so I believed it.

Well, I believed it until, a few years later, I encountered prophecy and healing, and they greatly enhanced my relationship with God. So I then went round trying to persuade fellow believers that, to be true and biblical, you had to be ‘Spirit-filled’!

As I explained in my very first article,<sup>[01]</sup> I’ve spent most of my life trying to persuade others that (my version of) ‘what the Bible teaches’ is correct. At my worst, I believed that one tiny sect held the true truth, validated by the leader’s spiritual gifts. Stupid boy!

What sparked today’s article was one friend saying she believes in ‘the absolute authority of the Bible’ and another telling me that the Bible is indeed inerrant – it contains *no errors*.

For the first, I have, over the years, taken different (even contradictory) things as being ‘biblically true’, but this ‘absolute authority’ was actually not the Bible itself, but my particular group’s *interpretation* of what the Bible teaches.

The second: (1) Who decides what is an ‘error’, anyway? (2) Why do we have to defend the Bible? (Google: ‘Spurgeon defend a lion’) (3) Anyone who thinks that the Bible does *not* contain contradictions hasn’t really studied it (faith/works,<sup>56</sup> predestination/free will).

Coming back to my initial comment, the all-loving God has communicated in any and every way possible, throughout the millennia, especially through fallible and errant people, through their loving, speaking and writing.

Paul Bev. 13.4.24

## 324 Devil's advocate

After I had played devil’s advocate over the sheep and goats,<sup>[323]</sup> my friend responded: ‘There’s no contradiction of faith/works, if properly understood’, and I agree with him...

In Mt 25<sup>31-46</sup> the plain meaning is that God decides our fate – sheep/goats, right/left, heaven/hell – on the basis of what we have *done* in our lives: have we cared for the sick, the poor, strangers, prisoners? It couldn’t be clearer: we are saved by works, plain and simple. And these are Jesus’ own words.

But this is only an *apparent* contradiction; we are saved not by works but by faith in Jesus. So how do we square this with other parts of Scripture? Well, we start with the context. (1) Who was Jesus talking to? *Self-righteous religious people*? (2) What was the cultural context? *Maybe people saw God as an angry judge who would condemn you soon as look at you*? Then (3) what was Jesus trying to get across to them? *Perhaps he just wanted to challenge their preconceived ideas*? And Jesus certainly used hyperbole elsewhere in his teaching – extravagant over-statement.

So, yes, the *plain meaning* of this passage is salvation by works, but because of our knowledge of Scripture overall, we affirm that, although Jesus *said* that, it can’t have been what he actually meant. Is that OK? [cue: devil’s advocate]

‘No! You don’t *like* what Jesus *clearly* said, so you’re *changing* it. You’re rejecting the plain meaning of Scripture!’

Well, to be fair, we can tend to ‘fiddle with Scripture’. We take those scriptures we like and quote them, often, and we ignore those scriptures we don’t like, or we ‘reinterpret’ them.

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<sup>56</sup> Rom 2<sup>6,7,10</sup> states clearly that we receive immortality, etc by *doing what is good* = works, not faith! Ditto Mt 25<sup>31-46</sup>.

Two principles I'd like to draw here: (1) We do sometimes *have* to take verses that seem to say one thing, and *interpret* them in the wider scriptural context. (2) We have to be very careful not to take words aimed at *one audience* and apply them to a *different audience*. (My oft-repeated example: Paul berates **Christians**: 'You stupid people, you *know* that God loves you and that Jesus has saved you, so why do you go on sinning?! The wages of sin is death.' And yet we use that to berate **unbelievers**: 'Believe in Jesus or you'll die!')

One other recurrent theme for me is how the blazes have we tortured and killed fellow believers in the name of Jesus?! Being charitable, they were trying to counter dangerous wrong teaching, but more realistically they feared their leadership being undermined – but all based on different *interpretations*.

Thankfully, we seem to have navigated allowing women to be accepted as leaders of churches, without killing one another (though some very hurtful comments have been made). Yet some people do *still* believe that we have allowed 'the world' to force us into its mould and have rejected God's intended best: male leadership.

My plea is that we accept that there *are* different interpretations of Scripture, so great care is needed, especially where insisting on 'the plain meaning' risks splitting our churches.

Paul Bev. 17.4.24

## 325 Wright on righteousness

As I know no New Testament Greek, I'm in the hands of those who do, and I've come to believe that Tom Wright is a safe pair of hands. I am finding his New Testament For Everyone (NTFE) translation really helpful.

In November,<sup>[299]</sup> I started trying to understand why 'righteousness' is not the most helpful of English words for communicating the Good News – indeed, Wright rarely uses it in his NTFE. Overleaf, I offer a number of parallel NIV / NTFE 'righteousness' verses for you to cogitate; Wright uses various alternatives, according to context, to help us understand what Jesus and Paul were trying to get across:

- 'covenant justice'
- 'God's justice'
- 'God's way'
- 'being in the right'
- 'God's whole saving plan'

What underlies Wright's translation, I believe, is his insistence<sup>[299,321]</sup> that the Good News is fundamentally about **restoration** – yes, we are estranged from God because of sin, but through faith in Jesus that relationship can be **restored**, we're brought back into covenant.

Wright's other insistence (and mine) is that the Good News is about bringing the kingdom **TO** earth – both now and ultimately – not taking us **AWAY** from earth to a nice heaven.

What transformed our lives in 2017 was moving to a church that centres on **restoration**; and that's what started my writing pilgrimage. Early on<sup>[2]</sup> I wrote, 'God's into **restorative** justice, not *retributive* justice.' How I thank God for showing me that!

Sadly, for the past few hundred years (maybe more?) the emphasis has *not* been on bringing us back into God's covenant family but more on avoiding God's condemnation and retribution. Am I wrong? Am I just being negative?

So, in presenting the Good News, I always focus on God's **restorative** justice, rather than the traditional: "You're a sinner deserving punishment, **but** Jesus died..."

I'll be interested to hear how you react to the verses below, but here are some random thoughts about 'righteousness', from considering Wright's translation:

- R is about *trusting*, not initially about *doing* (but doing should follow, of course)
- R is more about *motives* than about actions
- R relates to God's covenant, God's promise of **restoration**
- R is a status we are given, we're adopted into God's family
- R and 'justice' are closely linked; and that's **restorative** justice
- Jesus is R personified - R is about **relationship**

When you get time, do have a read of Jesus and Paul on righteousness.

Paul Bev. 21.4.24

## ***Jesus on Righteousness***

Mt 3:15 It is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.

**This is the right way for us to complete** God's whole saving plan.

5:6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

**Blessings on people who hunger and thirst for** God's justice! **You're going to be satisfied.**

5:10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

**Blessings on people who are persecuted because of** God's way! **The kingdom of heaven belongs to you.**

5:20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

**Yes, let me tell you: unless your** covenant behaviour **is far superior to that of the scribes and Pharisees...**

6:1. "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them.

**When you are practising your piety, mind you don't do it with an eye on the audience!**

6:33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness...

**Instead, make your top priority** God's Kingdom and his way of life...

21:32 John came to you to show you the way of righteousness

**John came to you, in accordance with** God's righteous covenant plan

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## ***Paul on righteousness***

Rom 1:17 For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

This is because God's covenant justice is unveiled in [the good news], from faithfulness to faithfulness. As it says in the Bible, "the just shall live by faith."

3:21,22 But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

But now, quite apart from the law (though the law and the prophets bore witness to it), God's covenant justice has been displayed. God's covenant justice comes into operation through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah, for the benefit of all who have faith.

4:3 What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."...  
So what does the Bible say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited in his favour, putting him in the right."

...(4 Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.) 5 However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness...

5 But if someone doesn't 'work', but simply believes in the one who declares the ungodly to be in the right, that person's faith is calculated in their favour, putting them in the right.

...6 David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:...

6 We see the same thing when David speaks of the blessing that comes to someone whom God calculates to be in the right apart from works:

...(7 "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. 8 Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.") 9 Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness...

9 So, then, does this blessing come on circumcised people or on uncircumcised? This is the passage we quoted: "His faith was calculated to Abraham as indicating that he was in the right."

...(10 Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before!) 11 And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them...

11 He received circumcision as a sign and seal of the status of covenant membership, on the basis of faith, which he had when he was still uncircumcised. This was so that he could be the father of all who believe even when uncircumcised, so that the status of covenant membership can be calculated to their account as well.

...(12 And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.) 13 It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.

13 The promise, you see, didn't come to Abraham or to his family through the law – the promise, that is, that he would inherit the world. It came through the covenant justice of faith.

## 326 Wright on Good News

This is such an amazing journey, and I feel privileged to be part of it – I do hope you sense that too. And for me that journey has just reached another stage, thanks to Tom Wright; this time it's his *Simply Good News*.

Where is the journey from and to? It's from 'what we've always been taught' to something hopefully *nearer to what Jesus and the early church taught (proclaimed?)*. Given all the terrible things that have been done over the centuries in the name of Jesus, I've struggled to understand how we have got things so terribly wrong. Mind you, the Bible is so full of all sorts of 'stuff' that anyone can pick out bits (each quoted in a suitable translation!) and use them to support whatever wacky ideas they might have.

Many find the Old Testament problematic and tend to stick to the New, but do you see how ironic that is? For Jesus and the early church that *was* the Bible – their *only* Bible – on which they based their preaching and teaching.

As I've travelled, I've kept getting the sense that 'the gospel' (as received) is very narrow. Thankfully, I now see the Good News as much more all-encompassing. Thanks, Tom!

When I started, I was reacting *against* the idea of God as a punisher (albeit a loving one), who provides a mechanism for escaping hell and getting to heaven. My first step away was Rohr's *Divine Dance* – the Christian faith really *is* a relationship. That excited me and motivated me, but I was still way off Wright's Good News.

I fought for ages against the evil beast of penal substitution, thinking that was what had led us astray – but no, the problem is far deeper. I had moved from salvation as an escape mechanism to it being a relationship but it was still in Wright's word just (good) 'advice'; it's about how *I* can relate to God – it's about *me*: 'an option you might like to take up, if you feel so inclined,' says Wright.

No, he insists, the Good News is an *announcement* about something that *has happened* (the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus the King), about what *is going to happen* (the return of Jesus the King, bringing heaven to earth), and that 'something powerful and mysterious *was happening* in the lives of all those who found themselves caught up in it'.

Can you see how totally different that is from what we've been taught? Our 'gospel' is simply advice about personal faith, how better to relate to God, how to pray, read the Bible, serve other people. That's all good and important stuff, says Wright, but it's still just personal advice, not the earth-shattering announcement that changed the first century world: '*Excuse me, folks, but actually Jesus is God; Caesar isn't!*'

I bet that went down well (not). But by God's power it actually *did* change the world. Amazing... and scary!

Paul Bev. 14.5.24

## 327 'A Bible-based church'

Please bring to mind an unsound church or sect. What do they base their teaching on? **Well, the Bible, I suppose.** So why do you say they are unsound? **Because they have misinterpreted and misrepresented the Bible.**

Let me push you further: how do you **know** the Xyz Church is wrong? **They run counter to the church's teaching.** Which church? **The church.** The Anglican Church? The Baptist Church? Which? The Catholic Church, maybe?

**Fundamentally, they go against what the Bible teaches.** But who decides what the Bible teaches? **We base it on what the Bible actually says!**

Do you see the problem? To get from what ‘the Bible says’ to what it actually means – what God is trying to tell us – we do actually rely on our own church’s (translation and) interpretation of the biblical manuscripts.

Now, I’ve also been looking at our own (UK certainly) shrinking and faction-torn church; compare it with the early church in all its dynamic numerical and geographical growth. Interestingly, they had to base their faith just on their ‘Bible’ (the Old Testament), plus the eye-witness accounts of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection and teaching – no New Testament.

My other thought (c/o Wright’s *Simply Good News*) is that our interpretation of the biblical documents is strongly influenced by our (church’s) view of what ‘the good news’ actually is. Let me try to articulate (hopefully not caricature) two possible views.

1) God created humans – perfect – we rebelled and needed saving. Jesus died to save us and rose again. Instead of being condemned by God we can be forgiven so that when we die we can be together with God – all sin and evil will be gone. Good news for us!

More complicatedly, and not properly thought out yet...

2) God created humans and gave us a place to live – to live with God. We messed up (then, and repeatedly since), but God promised (in various covenants) to come and be with us. God came to be with us in Jesus, and we took out our wrath on him, but the cross was actually the ultimate victory over evil. Then in the resurrection, God came to us as the first of the new creation – the new covenant was initiated. And God came as the Holy Spirit; Jesus became King, Messiah (as had been predicted). A new world, a new kingdom had begun – Jesus is Lord of all the earth! This was the start, and the culmination will be when God fully and finally comes in the new heaven and new earth. Good news for all creation!

Tom Wright – based on a lifetime of scholarship, including studying the contemporary world into which Jesus spoke announcing the kingdom – has done his own NT translation. This is associated with the much broader view of the good news (something like the above – I hope I’ve not misrepresented it), and much more God-centered and holistic, instead of me-centred. Hopefully back to more like the original Good News announcement.

Paul Bev. 21.5.24

## **328 I’ve been wrong – all this time!**

I like to see myself as someone who thinks radically, yet I *still* find it difficult to see things *other than* the ways I’ve been taught. I just spotted that I’ve again reverted to a me-centred ‘gospel’.<sup>[325]</sup> Sorry! But to be fair to myself, it’s difficult after 50+ years of indoctrination.

Is ‘indoctrination’ too strong a word? Well, I can only speak for myself, but yes, I feel I’ve allowed myself to be indoctrinated. Let’s check with the OED: ‘*the process of teaching a person or group to accept a set of beliefs uncritically*’ (my un-emphasis). The first bit is what Christians do: we teach people to accept a set of beliefs; we even write them down in carefully worded doctrinal statements.

OK, the OED definition includes ‘uncritically’, and I do try *not* to be uncritical. Certainly, I’ve been critical of the death-wielding, hell-threatening view of God, and I’ve tried to insist on a more restorative justice approach, but even after 300+ articles, I’m still talking mainly in me-and-my-relationship-with-God terms.<sup>[325]</sup> Doh!

But you might be saying, ‘Yes, that uncritical acceptance is what *you* do in the *established* churches, but we’re not bound by all that stuff. We’re a free church, and we go back to what the Bible teaches.’ Really? Is your church’s ‘gospel’ anything other than: ‘Have a relationship with God and you’ll be saved’?

Sorry, but while that might be helpful advice, it’s not what Jesus announced, nor what the early church announced. Do you *really* think the early church would have been persecuted – even killed – for just saying: ‘Here’s how to



have a relationship with God'? Indeed, would they have killed Jesus for just giving advice on getting closer to God?

Yes, in student days, I was questioning and critical of the basis of the faith presented by the churches I attended, but once I had 'accepted Jesus into my life', I never really questioned it – well, not until I lost my faith totally in 2011.

I was attracted to faith in the first place by seeing loving relationships in action, and I was thankfully drawn back by the same thing in the church I now attend, but is that what turned the world upside down?

I still stick to my claim<sup>[2ff]</sup> that the gospel is **not** a set of propositions about God and Jesus, and a transaction we enact ('give your heart to Jesus'). And I do still believe that my life has been totally transformed by coming into a relationship with God through Jesus. And I still rejoice that, through the Spirit's work, I can be a part of the glorious community of God's people... but that's not the gospel. It's excellent and important Bible-based advice, but it's not the gospel.

How do I know it's not the good news Jesus preached? Because it's advice for me, whereas the real good news is about what **God** has done, what **God** will do ultimately, and what **God** is doing now.

Paul Bev. 25.5.24

## ***329 Fear and domination – the problem***

(Gross oversimplification, I know, but I'm resolving the world's problems in 500 words.)

If you think that, basically, the church has got it right and that the gospel is 'going forth', then please don't waste your time reading this. We're preaching the gospel, and if people are not responding then that's their own fault – they've turned away from God!

Personally, I think there is something fundamentally wrong, and in all my writing I've been struggling to see why the church is so unattractive to people 'out there' and I think I might have spotted a pattern.

'The gospel' – as we know it – is very individualistic: 'How can I get saved?' So what if God's main concern is not about saving individuals but about restoring the whole world to how it should be – how it was pre-Fall? Thy kingdom come?

From caveman days, life has mainly revolved around fear and domination, so what if God wants us to live in love and cooperation (F+D vs. L+C)? It's a long road, but God sees the big picture and isn't willing to give up on us.

I've often pointed us back to Abraham, and how God tried to teach him that God was **not** an F+D deity. Yet throughout the OT, we see how people worked in F+D mode, while God desperately tried to show us a better way. Within the OT writings, God seeded all the pointers towards L+C, which came to a blindingly beautiful focus in Jesus, opening the way to lives dominated by self-sacrificing L+C, which is why the early church exploded.

'Job done!' said God, and sat back to watch the world become a better and better place? Sadly, no: humans can't get out of the habit of thinking they are 'right', that the others are 'wrong', and that it's our job (the church's job) to set them straight – back to F+D.

I'm no historian, but isn't this what, for example, European Christians have done all over the world? South and North America, Africa, India, etc, etc? They called it 'preaching the gospel', but maybe there were other agendas mixed in there, e.g. slavery?! (F+D)

Isn't it what Catholic Christians have done to Protestants?

What Protestants Christians have done to Catholics?

What Christian men have done to women?

What Christian heterosexuals have done to gay Christians? 'We know what's right and, despite your deepest feelings, you're wrong: either remain celibate or live in constant sin!'

Maybe you think that liberal democracy can bring L+C? It's about cooperation, after all. Theoretically, maybe, but how much L+C is there in, say, American foreign policy?!

Not solved, I agree, but I've analysed the problem in under 500 words; come back for the gospel solution – or read Irwin's children's book: *The Story of King Jesus*. Brilliant!

Paul Bev. 1.6.24

## 330 Fear and domination – the solution?

(Gross oversimplification, I know, but I'm solving the world's problems in 500 words.)

Last time, I suggested that the reason humans (esp. Christians?) manage to get it so spectacularly wrong is that they think they are right, so right that they have the right to force their views on others. 'That's what the Bible clearly teaches'. No, actually it's what my church teaches from my church's translation of the Bible.

The solution? Well, starting 2018 I tried to analyse what was wrong and, if the gospel is the solution, what *is* the gospel? Here's how my thinking has gone.

The gospel is *not* a set of propositions about God/Jesus and a transaction we have to make (take Jesus into your heart); it's relational and mysterious. (*The Divine Dance*)

The gospel is *not* retributive; it's about God's *restorative* justice. (*Healing the Gospel*)

The gospel is God relentlessly pursuing us. (*A More Christ-like God*; and video *Gospel in chairs*)

Great, but this is all still about me and my relationship with God; then I started being influenced by Tom Wright's books.

The gospel is *not* about us leaving this evil world, getting away to heaven; it's about God coming back to restore this place where God and humans first met: thy kingdom come.

The gospel is not advice about how we can relate to God; it's an announcement about what God has done (the facts of Jesus's life, death, resurrection and ascension), what God is going to do (finally bring heaven to earth) and what God is doing *now* (restoring the earth – the people and the planet) through the Spirit's power.

To me, this is the answer to the narrowness that I've been feeling for a long while about our so-called 'gospel'. Can you see how holistic this view is? God wants a complete restoration, and it starts *now*.

The trouble is, we keep slipping back into F+D; we keep insisting that we know what's 'right' – because we've studied our Bibles. Currently, a huge and potentially destructive F+D is our risking splitting churches and alienating non-churchgoers on the basis of saying that the Bible 'clearly teaches' what is 'right' if you are trying to follow the way of Jesus, and you're gay.

If Jesus is Lord (the gospel), can we not work together with people who have a different view of what the Bible teaches? For the sake of the kingdom, I will work with people who think women shouldn't lead churches, I will

work with people who have a different view of communion, I will work with anyone of goodwill who seeks to make this world a better place, and I won't try to 'convert' them to my view of what the Bible teaches.

Too radical? Jesus was pretty radical.

Paul Bev. 2.6.24

## 331 My journey from right to wrong

I've been trying to understand how, as a relatively intelligent bloke, I could have gone so horribly wrong that I ended up in a tiny sect, and nearly lost Sue.<sup>101</sup> And in parallel, how has the church gone so horribly wrong, in various inventive ways, over the centuries? I'll concentrate on my own experience here, but only to illustrate possible causes for the latter.

My parents didn't go to church but my friend up the road was the son of a church minister, an ex-China missionary, and my parents were happy for a bit of P&Q while I went to Sunday School. In sixth form an atheistic teacher influenced me, offset by experiencing the real Christian love of a community in Yorkshire, but it was as a student in Cambridge that my faith 'became personal'.

There I learned the facts about sin and salvation, which made sense to my engineering brain, and about how it was our job (a) to make sure we knew accurately what the Bible taught and (b) to propagate that truth. For (a) we had people like John Stott and Michael Green, and were fed on stories of how the CU movement was founded (in Oxford and Cambridge) to preserve the truth of the gospel – essential, because the Student Christian Movement had 'gone liberal'.

For (b) we had the stories of pioneering missionaries, such as The Cambridge Seven, and I went on church missions and Scripture Union camps.

We knew we were right and, as educated people, it was our responsibility carry that truth forward. To us, what 'proved' the Christian message was the resurrection, and we often quoted *Who moved the stone?* Apparently Frank Morison was a lawyer who tried to disprove the resurrection and ended up coming to faith.<sup>57</sup>

We were taught that Catholics had *seriously* wrong ideas, women could be teachers and missionaries but not lead churches, and the gifts of the Spirit, such as tongues and prophesy, were only for the early church – all as the Bible makes clear.

Later the charismatic movement taught me that the gifts *were* for today's church; indeed, through 'power evangelism' people could come to faith – the reality of God was *proved* by miracles. Then when I attended the All-Africa Conference for Renewal, one-third of the delegates were Catholics – lovely people, alive and excited about God. A bit confusing!

Then I did 'internet evangelism' where, prompted by a 'God slot' that I wrote in my technical magazine (almost every month for 20 years) I discussed the faith by email; I persuaded some to come to faith.

Have you spotted the pattern? I've spent most of my Christian life persuading people that I am right (well we are!) so they need to believe us (well, believe the Bible) and 'give your life to Jesus'. And now? I know I'm wrong – in various ways – but, Bible-aided, I'm on The Way, seeking to draw closer to God and closer to other people.

Paul Bev. 15.6.24

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<sup>57</sup> In fact, Frank Morison was the nom de plume of Albert Henry Rossan, an advertising agent, a member of the Institute of Incorporated Practitioners in Advertising – but I'm pretty sure I was told he was a lawyer.

## 332 *Two exercises for you to try*

I've claimed before that anyone translating the Bible does so by choosing words in their own language that chime in with their overall understanding of what God is trying to say to us through the Bible.

So I accept that Tom Wright's translation (which I find really helpful) echoes his belief that the gospel, as proclaimed by the early church, is not *primarily* about my sin and how Jesus died to forgive me and bring me into a new relationship with God. That's a glorious and essential result of the gospel, but it's not what the early church proclaimed, announced, preached.

So, recently, I read through his translation of Acts and, in soft pencil, I wrote notes relating to what Tom believes to be the gospel as they understood it – an announcement that, in fulfilment of the OT prophecies, something very significant actually *happened*: Jesus lived, preached, taught, healed, was killed, came back to life, was seen and touched, then returned to God. The second strand of the gospel was that – again as a fulfilment – Jesus is now Lord, King, Messiah and that one day he will return to this earth so that finally and fully God will dwell with us, and all will be restored (i.e. something *will happen*). The third strand is that here and now God's kingdom is being brought to bear, in power, here on earth; we will see people's behaviour changing and a community being established of people who bow to Jesus' authority (i.e. something *is happening* now).

[Sorry, Tom, I hope this isn't too far off what you're saying.]

So I wrote 'WH' for statements about what had happened, 'AU' for things about Jesus' authority, 'RT' for Jesus' return, and scribbled 'commun' and 'behav' as appropriate; a lot of this referred back to the Bible they had at the time. For me, an eye-opening exercise!

Now I'd like to try an imaginative exercise. We're going on a (rather extravagant) church long weekend away to visit a church 2000 miles away, our long-standing twinning.

Their minister said it would be really wonderful if we could share Communion together and, as they are a fairly poor church, she asked if we would bring the necessary equipment with us [do adjust this for your own church, dear reader]: maybe guitars and a keyboard, PA equipment, a projector and a big screen? And whatever we need for the Communion, whether that's a few wooden trays with holes in for little glasses of wine, or a full silver Communion Set (candles, if you like); and our minister is invited to wear whatever she feels is appropriate for the Communion.

One slight twist is that this church weekend is also a time-travel, to Corinth in about 60/80 AD.

And on the Sunday afternoon, we might like to break into groups and have a Bible study on Luke 22:15-22 and 1 Cor 11:23-26.<sup>[211 What is communion?]</sup>

Do let me know how the weekend goes.

Paul Bev. 17.6.24

## 333 *The God I don't believe in*

'Our father', Jesus started, when he was asked, 'Lord, teach us to pray.' So how did Jesus view his heavenly Father? Therefore how should we view God?

Rightly or wrongly, I've come to view God as the ultimate parent,<sup>[107,214]</sup> and a God like that, who loves us so much, will do whatever it takes to enable us to come into that love. So when a human parent has children that mess up – small time or big time – what is their main concern? Is it to punish them for their wrongdoing?

No, that parent will do whatever it takes to bring that child back into their love. And every child is different, so what helps one child might turn another child away. But overall when your kids mess up, you just want to clean them up; you want to help them keep away from the negative influences in their lives; and you desperately want to stop them hurting each other, right? I got most cross with my two boys when they were hurting each other.

Now who is this God that I *don't* believe in anymore? And I'll state this in an extreme way, but if any element of this is true in your experience, please compare it with the God that Jesus portrayed, especially in the prodigal father who had two very different sons.

God is an angry deity who punishes people when they sin. He (this God is certainly not a 'she'!) needs to be propitiated – his anger needs to be turned away, but how? Well, because this God also loves us, he has worked out a way – a very clever, self-sacrificing way.

I don't need to explain the mechanism that God uses; we've rehearsed it a million times in our churches, but be assured that this is the *only* way God can wash away our sins. How do I know? Because we've studied our Bibles assiduously over the centuries and we've developed our systematic theology so that we can be absolutely certain how God works.

Look into the Old Testament – there's that angry God needing to be propitiated by sacrifice; indeed, the father of our faith, Abraham, was willing to sacrifice his own son – can you believe that?! But the OT also has the seeds of the loving parent view, all ready for Jesus to explain and exemplify for his followers – for us. Hence he clashed big time with the Pharisees who were propagating the angry God image.

I don't know, historically, when we lost Jesus' loving parent and got back the Pharisees' angry deity, but we did.

But ironically God loves us sooo much that he is even to use this *distorted view* of an angry deity to enable people to come into the loving relationship for which we were created.

How much better it would be if we could go back to Jesus' view of God as the ultimate loving parent!

Please let it be so.

Paul Bev. 21.6.24

## 334 *Fundamental questions about the Bible*

Let me give you three books on childcare: *Childcare for New Parents*; *Caring for Mentally and Physically Challenged Children*; and *Paediatric Surgery* – and two quotes: 'You need to physically restrain the child...' and 'Using a 3" scalpel, start your incision...'

When reading what a book actually *says*, it's important to check the *context* (e.g. 'After anaesthetic...'); also, the *meaning* can only be fully understood given the book's *purpose*.

Now the Bible isn't actually 'a book'; it's 66 different books with different *purposes*, written in different *contexts*, so if we want to go from what it *says* to what it *means* – including for us today – the potential for misunderstanding is huge.

No worries! My Study Bible has a Preface for each book: 'Meaning and purpose'. But hang on, that's a human being telling me how I should understand the meaning of what the book actually says.

I'm not being awkward but if we want to know what God is saying to us, then Bible passages do have to be interpreted. And more than that; most of us have to rely on other human beings to take what the human writers actually wrote and *translate* it. But in order to convey the meaning the translators need to first *interpret* the meaning of those texts.<sup>58</sup> And they were written in a totally different language and a totally different culture at a totally different time – yet more room for misunderstanding and misinterpretation!

Why ever would God use such a massively human-dependent system to communicate with us?! Maybe it's because God loves us and wants, in any way possible, to 'show love to a thousand generations'?

I'm sorry, but we have to rely *a lot* on our fellow humans if we want to know what God is trying to say to us. Thankfully, God is there to inspire all of us by the Holy Spirit and to point us in the right direction, but we do have to think and pray and read and compare and contrast – and not just rely on *what we've always been told*.

Now, we can ask about the meaning and purpose of an individual book, but that has to relate to the overall purpose of the Bible. Which is?... How about, 'to know God better and make God better known'?

Do we know God 100%? Of course not, but I did say, 'better'. Did the OT writers know God 100%? Of course not, but I think they made progress over the generations.

Did Jesus know God 100%. Ah, now we're getting somewhere. If we had Jesus as our Bible study leader, wouldn't that be great?! But we do have a written account of what Jesus said and did, so maybe that can help us to interpret the OT?

In response to my previous article,<sup>[333]</sup> a friend referred to treating the OT as 'a mixture of truth and falsehood', while 'our Lord accepted and affirmed the [OT] Scriptures in their entirety.' Thoughts, anyone?

Paul Bev. 27.6.24

## 335 True or false?

Yes, I know I overstate things, but only to provoke you to question things you were taught. And, goaded by my overstated article,<sup>[333]</sup> a friend referred to my treating the OT as 'a mixture of truth and falsehood', while 'our Lord accepted and affirmed the Scriptures in their entirety.' I asked last time<sup>[334]</sup> if you wanted to discuss that statement. So, is now a good time?

Having lost my faith totally, I have spent seven years checking out what I was taught, on which I had based my faith. I used to think that the Bible, end to end, was inspired; but now I *know in my heart* that it was *all* inspired by God – wonderfully so! How else could a selection of diverse authors from different walks of life, over a huge span of time, writing in different genres, tell such a unified story about God, about humans, and about how we can live together in love. Amazing!

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<sup>58</sup> In the preface to his New Testament For Everyone, NTW wrote, 'Equally, as with all translations ever made, I have taken a particular view on point after point of interpretation, and my understanding of the many controversial passages in the New Testament shows up, naturally enough, in the translation as well.'

Did you see how I slipped in there the **purpose** for which I think the Bible was inspired? Misunderstand the purpose of a book (or books) and you can get things very wrong.<sup>[334]</sup>

In my view, the Bible was not given to us as a specification of what is true and what is false. Are you shocked by that? Please don't be; I do still believe there's such a thing as falsehood and such a thing as evil, and that we need to fight against them.

In an excellent short course run by Rev Alex Irving, about the creeds, he explained how they were provided as a defence against the worst falsenesses of misunderstanding the nature of God and of what Jesus achieved on the cross.

That bit in bold, to me, is the diamond that I have begun to appreciate more and more these past few years, but if you look, you'll see that none of the creeds specify **how** Jesus' death atoned for our sins, simply **that** our sin is removed by his death.

Sadly, the glorious and varied facets of that diamond have become, in the past few hundred years, the subject of 'atonement wars': theologians have argued over the *exact mechanism*. And the conservative end of the Evangelical movement has only one mechanism that God uses to take away sin. (My friend did admit a few years ago that penal substitution is 'pastorally unhelpful for some people'.)

Worse still, that single mechanism has become 'the gospel', which Evangelicals preach repeatedly. In recent articles, I have pointed to Tom Wright's view of what the gospel really is, as preached by the early church.

As Jesus explained to that couple on the Emmaus road, the purpose of the Scriptures was to point to him – Jesus fulfilled those inspired Scriptures. If you study the OT with Jesus as your Bible study leader, you'll see just how inspired – and inspiring – the OT actually is.

How I praise God for the richness of the Old Testament!

Paul Bev. 3.7.24

## 336 True or false – more thoughts

*(This is a more negative article than I like writing, but I'm trying to counter the negative impression of God that, sadly, I have promoted for most of my Christian life.)*

One friend I disagree with – a vicar – told me that they do sometimes use the Prayer Book confession that refers to 'manifold sins and wickedness ... provoking most justly thy *wrath and indignation against* us'. As a new believer, a college student, I used to recite that at every communion service.

When I expressed surprise in my email at his use of that wording (I tried not to sound too shocked), his single-line response was, 'What do you do with Romans 1?' What indeed?! 'The wrath of God is revealed **against**...'

Knowing the importance of context, I reread the whole chapter. Amazing! Paul is bubbling over with the glory of the good news about Jesus, and his joy in sharing it, and how it transforms lives when we trust in God. He clearly loves them and he's revelling in the positive changes that have occurred in their lives...

...then something really weird happens; it's like someone has turned a switch. At v. 18, he suddenly seems to get angry and pours out a litany of the terrible things that people do. What's going on? (It's ironic that my friend should think I'm ignoring this passage. I've just checked: Romans 1 appears in 43 of my 336 articles!) But, yes, what **do** I do with it?

- 1) I read it (18–32) in its context – especially 1–17 and ch. 2 (more anger there, against the Christians).
- 2) I read it in its historical and cultural context. (To whom is Paul referring when he mentions *their* wickedness, *their* godlessness, *their* suppressing the truth?)
- 3) Only then do I try to interpret it and apply it to 2024. But...
- 4) I also try to check it with my ‘Bible study leader’, Jesus.<sup>[335]</sup> In other words, if the conclusion I reach from 3) is **not** something that I could imagine Jesus saying, then I go back and check the passage and its context – maybe I’ve wrongly interpreted it?

When confessing your sins using that prayer, could you imagine Jesus standing in front of you expressing wrath and indignation against you? I can’t.

As a student from a loveless family I discovered God’s love in the Christians I met, and I did wonder about that wording. But if it’s what the church says, it must be right. Right?!

No! Just because a minister or a vicar or a Christian book says something, don’t just accept it. If nothing else, hold it up to the template of Jesus and ask, ‘Would/did Jesus say that?’

When the human Jesus showed wrath and indignation it was against people who caused others to stumble. Sadly, by promoting a negative image of God, I’ve been guilty of that.

Paul Bev. 9.7.24

## 337 True or false – even more thoughts

(This is a more negative article than I like writing, but I’m trying to counter the negative impression of God that, sadly, I have promoted for most of my Christian life.)

One friend I disagree with – a vicar – told me that they do sometimes use the Prayer Book confession that refers to ‘manifold sins and wickedness ... provoking most justly thy *wrath and indignation against* us’. As a new believer, a college student, I used to recite that at every communion service.

When I expressed surprise in my email at his use of that wording (I tried not to sound too shocked), his single-line response was, ‘What do you do with Romans 1?’ What indeed?! ‘The wrath of God is revealed **against**...’

Knowing the importance of context, I reread the whole chapter. Amazing! Paul is bubbling over with the glory of the good news about Jesus, and his joy in sharing it, and how it transforms lives when we trust in God. He clearly loves them and he’s revelling in the positive changes that have occurred in their lives...

...then something really weird happens; it’s like someone has turned a switch. At v. 18, he suddenly seems to get angry and pours out a litany of the terrible things that people do. What’s going on? (It’s ironic that my friend should think I’m ignoring this passage. I’ve just checked: Romans 1 appears in 43 of my 336 articles!) But, yes, what **do** I do with it?

- 1) I read it (18–32) in its context – especially 1–17 and ch. 2 (more anger there, against the Christians).
- 2) I read it in its historical and cultural context. (To whom is Paul referring when he mentions *their* wickedness, *their* godlessness, *their* suppressing the truth?)
- 3) Only then do I try to interpret it and apply it to 2024. But...



4) I also try to check it with my 'Bible study leader', Jesus.<sup>[335]</sup> In other words, if the conclusion I reach from 3) is **not** something that I could imagine Jesus saying, then I go back and check the passage and its context – maybe I've wrongly interpreted it?

When confessing your sins using that prayer, could you imagine Jesus standing in front of you expressing wrath and indignation against you? I can't.

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When the human Jesus showed wrath and indignation it was against people who caused others to stumble. Sadly, by promoting a negative image of God, I've been guilty of that.

Paul Bev. 9.7.24

## ***338 Person, Purpose and Prejudice***

My dad was a lovely man – everyone agreed. They often said, 'He's a real gentleman.' He was indeed a real *gentle man*, and he would do anything for anyone. But if you talked to my mum you'd get a very different picture. For whatever reason, their relationship broke down, and no matter what my father did or said, Mum would interpret it negatively. It's an all too familiar story: it's called prejudice. We judge someone's words and actions according to what we think of that person.

Now, I believe that the purpose of the Bible is to tell us about a Person – it records the actions and words of this Person, especially in relation to a people. And I see the Bible as helping us, as a community, to build a relationship with that Person, and to build relationships generally – including with the place that God gave us.

We're human and we make value judgements – we have to in order to survive: 'Is this plant food or poison?' and 'Is that person friend or foe?' The trouble with relationships is that once we've made up our mind about someone – what they are like and what their motives are – it's very difficult to change it. It's called 'prejudice'.

If you had never met my dad, and relied on what Mum said, then clearly you'd start off at a disadvantage. And isn't that very similar to how we introduce people to God/Jesus? Indeed, isn't it also true of how we read and apply the Bible? We interpret the purpose of a passage of Scripture according to our view of the Person we believe it is telling us about. We may think we are *objectively* studying the Bible, but if we are more realistic, maybe we should admit to some degree of prejudice?

I'm prejudiced when I read Romans 1 & 2: I'm looking for a restorative God who wants at whatever cost and in any way possible to draw people into relationship. So I read those verses looking for that kind of interpretation. Yes, I'm prejudiced; I admit it!

In the past few articles I've rehearsed how my view of God has changed. As a student I recited those prayers about God's wrath and indignation against me, and frankly I don't think that was too helpful! It prejudiced me.

Is it actually true that 'the wrath of God is revealed against...?' (1:18) Yes, I believe it is. However, based on what the Bible shows Jesus-God to be like, I now see the **purpose** of that passage differently. Talking to Christians, Paul was not trying to educate them to the **fact** that God judges sinners; he was mainly telling them not to be judgmental. He's saying, 'You know God, so you are in a privileged position, and so you will be judged with greater strictness!'

How do Christians often come across to people outside the church? And how do we portray God? As judgmental?

Paul Bev. 12.7.24

## 339 Two Four Six Eight

Sunday morning, I thought, 'I haven't got anything specific to study this morning!' (I'm not very good at working through Bible study notes, sorry.) In the end, I decided to start reading Ephesians. What an amazing first chapter! As with Romans 1,<sup>[337]</sup> Paul pours out his appreciation for God and all that God has done.

I then went to church, only to find that the reading was... Eph 1<sup>3-14</sup> (as set by the CofE lectionary), so immediately my spiritual antennae were raised.

But I had also thought of some different issues that Eph 1 could raise (predestination and freewill, anyone?), but over coffee after the service, a few of us got chatting – about God. (That's another thing I appreciate about my new church: people seem to want to talk about their faith.) The lightbulb moment for me was that while we may not fully *understand* the passage, we can certainly *appreciate* how much God has done for us. That then warms us towards God and fills us with praise. Maybe that was what Paul was doing when he wrote those words, rather than concentrating on accurate theology?

I had read Wright's translation, and was struck by v. 18, 'Then you will *know exactly* what the hope is that goes with God's call.' Was Paul really saying we'd know *exactly*?! So I went to Bible Gateway and found a number of slightly different interpretations... which I won't pursue – that's not my point.

At college (which is where I came to faith) we had interminable discussions about predestination and freewill. (The word 'predestined' only appears here, and in two verses in Romans 8.) The thing is that, by pursuing the idea of predestination, some strands of the church have ended up pushing it to say that God predestines some people to go to hell.

I think the problem comes when people interpret Scripture in order to know things *exactly*. Anyway, predestination and freewill are logically contradictory – 'they can't both be true'. And yet this is God we're talking about: of course we can't totally 'understand' the God who created the universe. So maybe there are times when we need to stress predestination. But I see the overriding teaching of Scripture as that we're free to respond.

So I'm here to urge caution (again, sorry) if there's an issue where you feel that 'the plain teaching of Scripture' shows us something definite, and you feel there are other verses that support your view.

I've illustrated this issue before by quoting Mt 25<sup>31-46</sup> – the very words of Jesus, without any variations in translation: God decides our fate (heaven or hell, sheep or goats) based on whether we care for the sick, the poor, strangers, prisoners. It couldn't be clearer: salvation by works. But, yes, I see the overriding teaching of Scripture as that we're saved by faith, not works – despite what Jesus actually said.

We need to *appreciate* God more – and develop fewer dogmatic biblical interpretations.

Paul Bev. 20.7.24

## 340 Positive reinforcement

As both a trainee teacher and a (trainee) parent the idea of positive reinforcement was high on the agenda: A child that is constantly told it is useless and annoying and naughty tends to live up to that; yet if we constantly praise, encourage and affirm a child, they are more likely to succeed in life. Let's apply this to friends and family who don't yet know God.

We want to introduce people to their heavenly parent so, as faithful Christians, we quote from our Bibles and tell them that they are 'people whose whole lives consist of disobeying God' and they are 'dead in transgressions and sins' and 'gratifying the cravings of (y)our sinful nature' and 'by nature deserving of [God's] wrath'!

Not exactly positive reinforcement! And if you think I'm cherry-picking, those verses are *all* from Eph 2 – the chapter I'm wrestling with at the moment. Read it for yourself if you think I'm exaggerating.

Yes, \*do\* read that chapter. It \*is\* very positive. It is celebrating the wonderful way God has taken sworn enemies – Jews and Gentiles – and made them into one people, one community of love and support. And don't we need that in our world today?!

Three points to make:

- 1) The Bible *is* full of apparent contradictions, so please don't try to 'prove' things to people by quoting Scripture.
- 2) When people translate the Bible, their basic attitude to God shows through, sometimes massively.
- 3) It's especially dangerous and destructive to quote verses *out of context*.

By (mis)using these three principles we've put off vast numbers of people from seeing the love of God that we see in Jesus and created *negative reinforcement*. Can I justify my three points? Yes, in reverse order:

**3)** I quoted a few *negative* verses out of a very *positive* passage celebrating God's amazing love in building a community. (And 'the wages of sin'<sup>Rom 6:23</sup> is another negative ripped out of a positive passage, and a letter written to Christians, used to harangue non-Christians!)

**2)** Here are two translations of the exact same sales blurb for a Russian children's book:

- a saga of curses and witchcraft: *The Castle of the Spider's Web*
- a tale of spells and enchantment: *Cobweb Castle*

(N.B. This is made-up rubbish, but it illustrates how the choice of individual words can be affected by the translator's interpretation of the overall point and purpose of a text.)

1) Just from within Eph 2...

- 2<sup>15</sup> 'by **abolishing** in his flesh **the Law** with its commandments and regulations.' vs. Mt 5<sup>17</sup>. 'Do **not** think that I have come to **abolish the law** or the prophets; I have **not** come to **abolish** them but to fulfil them.'
- 'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith ... **not by works**, so that no-one can boast.' (Eph 2<sup>8,9</sup>) vs. Mt 25<sup>31-46</sup> where Jesus explains heaven/hell decisions (sheep/ goats) as being based on **works**.<sup>[339]</sup>

(I mentioned predestination and freewill last time.<sup>[339]</sup>)

Why do we do this?! When will we learn to be positive?!

Paul Bev. 25.7.24

## 341 More positive routes

The route that I and others are travelling is becoming more and more positive, and I'm becoming more and more excited about the landscape I see. This really is 'good news', and I'm definitely 'not ashamed of it'.

Today, I started from last time's question:<sup>[340]</sup> Why do Christians so often come over as negative? I wanted to make it a positive response, and not a moan about what the church has got wrong. Then I was drawn to Rom 1<sup>16,17</sup>. The contrast between Tom Wright's translation and the NIV epitomised the changes in my view of the good news. (The coloured bits highlight the differences.)

I am not ashamed of the **gospel**, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a **righteousness** from God is revealed, a righteousness that is **by faith from first to last**, just as it is written: 'The **righteous** will live by faith.' (NIV)

I'm not ashamed of the **good news**; it's God's power, bringing salvation to everyone who believes – to the Jew first, and also, equally, to the Greek. This is because God's **covenant justice** is unveiled in it, **from faithfulness to faithfulness**. As it says in the Bible, 'the **just** shall live by faith.' (NTFE)

The blue bits reminded me that, since 2021, I have followed Scot McKnight and Tom Wright's view that the good news of Jesus, as announced in the first century, is very different from the packaged 'gospel' we preach.<sup>[181,182,184,187,188,190,191,270]</sup>

The red bits point to Tom's view that 'righteous(ness)' is much misunderstood.<sup>[191,270,325,332]</sup> It's a big topic, but Tom's translation points to two themes that I've pursued. The first is that the good news is about **restorative justice**, not **retributive justice**.<sup>59</sup> (I no longer see the idea of penal substitution as wrong per se, but discussing who is going to be punished is not an approach I find helpful.) And the second theme is righteousness as a **covenant** relationship.<sup>[135,136,168,225-227,325]</sup>

Not sure about the green bits, but 'faith' can too easily be associated with a set of beliefs. For me, it's more about **who I believe in**, like the parallel verse: *I am not ashamed, because I know **the one I have trusted**, and I'm convinced that he has the power to keep safe until that day what I have entrusted to him.*<sup>2 Tim 1:12</sup> Faith is about a Person.

I'm definitely not 'right' in the stuff I cogitate on here, but I'm wanting us to challenge our own **interpretations** of the English texts of our Bibles, which are **translations** of the Greek and Hebrew texts, **translations** that are based on the theological **interpretations** of those who did the **translations**, and these are affected by their idea of what God is like.

Hopefully we're getting a little nearer to the **more positive roots** and shoots that sprang up and took the world by storm in the first century. Lord, let it be so!

Paul Bev. 28.7.24

## 342 Check that context!

When digging with the Caistor Roman Project, I'd be thrilled if I found a Roman coin or a brooch. To interpret that find and to know what it actually meant, we'd need to know exactly where I found it – we call that the context – in order to figure out what was happening there almost 2000 years ago. But if someone found a piece of Victorian pottery close by, I'd be gutted because our interpretation would have to be very different.

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<sup>59</sup> Thankfully, I discovered restorative justice early: 2,3,4,49,**57,61**,76,140,180,183,186,270,296,299,301,**325**,328,330.

So, on my quest for a more positive approach to faith,<sup>[340,1]</sup> I've been reading about the 'good news' that Paul is definitely not ashamed of, and this morning a lightbulb flashed on: If Paul thought – as I *used* to think – that 'the gospel' was simply a means of gaining personal salvation and 'going to heaven', then why would anyone be *ashamed* of it?! So that's extra evidence that our interpretation needs to change, and I (following Tom Wright) say we need to change *back* to the 'good news' that the early church announced.

'Whoa! I'd better just check the context,' I thought, and within seconds, I crashed into two issues that I've struggled with these past few years: the wrath of God<sup>Rom 1:18</sup> and the gay issue.<sup>1:26,27</sup> Worse still, those verses are context-linked back to my more positive good news;<sup>1-17</sup> starting with, 'For...' (as in 'because...') and 'So...' (as in 'therefore'). Drat, I hate negativity!

What's more, the text about gay actions is very plain – graphic, even – 'uncleanness', 'shameful desires', 'dishonoured', 'natural...unnatural', 'inflamed with lust', 'shameless acts', 'received repayment'. Couldn't be clearer – no wonder God is full of wrath. But I read on into chapter 2 and looked at Paul's *overall* argument, and the context looked different.

Paul's list in the first chapter is things that are *clearly* wrong, his own anger reflecting that of God's wrath, but he then moves on to talk about two different groups, Jews and Greeks – those who have the benefit of God's revelation and those who don't. He says they will be judged differently. After that terrible list of wicked ways Paul admonishes the Christians:

*But if you judge those who do them and yet you do them yourself, do you suppose that you will escape God's judgment?*<sup>2:3</sup>

*But by your hard, unrepentant heart you are building up a store of anger for yourself on the day of anger,*<sup>2:5</sup>

*But when people act out of selfish desire, and do not obey the truth, but instead obey injustice, there will be anger and fury.*<sup>2:8</sup>

And that last too, I think, must be aimed at Christians, because people who haven't been given the truth can't be accused of failing to obeying it!

OK, we've got hold of the overall context – how Christians will be judged for their wrong attitudes – and actions – so with the help of Tom Wright's *Paul for Everyone* commentary, next time, I'll focus on the much-quoted Romans 1:26,27 – but *in context*!

Paul Bev. 1.8.24

## **343 More thoughts on gay marriage**

As promised, I'm looking at that much-quoted passage, Romans 1<sup>24-27</sup>, but doing so within the context and purpose of the two chapters.

In his 2004 edition of the *Paul for Everyone* commentary Tom Wright dedicates more time and space to explaining some of those 61 verses than others. He writes about a few verses at a time, and so I counted the number of lines of text: it varies from 12 lines per verse to 46. Which section warrants the 46? Yes, it's about my thrilling, 'I am not ashamed' passage;<sup>1:14-17</sup> where Tom challenges the traditional gospel-as-personal-salvation view, and I'm 150% behind him in his stance – it has transformed my faith!<sup>[340,1]</sup>

Not surprisingly, the second most commented, at 33 lines per verse, is my much-quoted passage.<sup>1:24-27</sup> Here, Tom puts forward the traditional interpretation, explaining from Genesis 1–3 that ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ refers to complementarity, a principle I happily accept as the ideal.

Now, I’m tremendously grateful to Tom for opening my eyes on all sorts of things, but in this case, having looked at the context of Romans 1+2,<sup>[342]</sup> I see things differently. Paul was mainly focused on the range of terrible things that people do when they ‘*suppress the truth by their wickedness*’; he was not trying to explain *why* these were so awful, just stating them as a given – they were obviously wrong.

Yes, I realise that this passage, taken with others including Gen 1–3, form the basis for the traditional view on gay issues, but let’s test that view of Rom 1<sup>26,27</sup> by trying to apply the actual text to my two friends who seek to follow Jesus, but who are gay and who have fallen in love. They had to work out, from the Scriptures, whether intimately expressing their love for one another, within a faithful Christian marriage, would be wrong.

So, which of Paul’s words that I quoted last time relate to the joy my friends share as they celebrate their love for one another: uncleanness, shameful desires, dishonour, natural... unnatural, inflamed with lust, shameless acts, received repayment?

Whatever it is that Paul is so angry about, it seems a world away from the attitudes and intentions of my two friends. The broader issues of fidelity, mutuality, support and, yes, deep love, are a world away from Paul’s mind here, as he lists these clearly awful things.

My friends we will be judged by God – as we all will – for their attitudes and actions, but judged by God and *not by each other*, as Romans 1+2 makes clear.

The traditional line says that there is *only one way* of understanding how to apply Paul’s writings in the 21st century, and that the church is allowing itself to be pressurised into changing its view.<sup>60</sup> Personally, I think that followers of Jesus should have a less dogmatic approach; Christians are too often negative and condemning.

Paul Bev. 2.8.24

## 344 The Jesus hermeneutic

I guess most *mis*interpretation is well-meaning, but the first case was deliberate. In Gen 3, the snake said, **Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’**

So the woman checked her Bible and quoted: **You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will surely die.**<sup>Gen 2:17</sup>

**You will not surely die!** the snake retorted. And in a sense he was right: while God did say, ‘You will surely die,’ God didn’t mean *literally*, ‘you will drop down dead’.

A bit far-fetched, but my point is that interpretation involves going from what the Bible *says* to what it actually *means*. God inspired those who wrote it, but for what *purpose* – for the people at the time and for later generations? Missing the *purpose* of a Scripture – for then or for now – can cause real problems, so we need Jesus’ help. We need Jesus’ way of interpreting Scripture – his hermeneutic. So what does Jesus say?...

**Don’t suppose that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn’t come to destroy them; I came to fulfil them! I’m telling you the truth: until heaven and earth disappear, not one stroke, not one dot is going to disappear from**

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<sup>60</sup> Compare that with the view of my vicar friend who says that the church has been drawn away from the Bible’s teaching (esp. Gen 1–3) that only men should lead churches, cf. David Pawson’s book, *Leadership is male*.

the law until it has all come true. So anyone who relaxes a single one of these commandments, even the little ones, and teaches that to the people, will be called least in the Kingdom of heaven. But anyone who does them and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of heaven. **Yes, let me tell you: unless your covenant behaviour is far superior to that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the Kingdom of heaven.**<sup>Mt 5:17-19 (NTFE)</sup>

Sounds pretty clear, doesn't it? The Old Testament laws remain, and if I break even *one* of them, I'm in trouble; and **unless my behaviour is 100% righteous, I won't get to heaven.** As with Jesus' sheep and goats teaching,<sup>Mt 25:31-46</sup> this is salvation by what we do – by works. **Jesus! This isn't helping me!** Also, it's talking about 'going to heaven', which I've been saying is *not* the good news that was preached by the early church.

OK, but set against this the fact that Jesus *deliberately* broke some of those laws: **He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests.**<sup>Mt 12:3-8</sup>

And even one of the Ten Commandments: **At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them.**<sup>Mt 12:1</sup> But he did also say to them, **The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.**<sup>Mk 2:27,8</sup>

To me, this is Jesus showing us how to read our Bibles – look for the **purpose** – the purpose for the **first hearers** (e.g. don't eat shellfish<sup>Dt 14:9,10</sup> – it can poison you!) and its purpose for **now**. But for the latter, I can't tell you how to interpret – that's between you and God. However, if we differ in our application, I have to take care not to judge you.

Paul Bev. 4.8.24

## **345 Jesus hermeneutic – positives and negatives**

I claimed last time that to see God's positive, we need to follow Jesus' way of reading and interpreting the Bible: look for the **purpose** of the passage, past, present and future.

So what's the purpose of the OT as a whole? Last time, I quoted Jesus' words: **not one stroke, not one dot is going to disappear from the law until it has all come true,**<sup>NTFE</sup> which to me is very positive: we need the *whole of the OT* because it sets before us God's long-term plan, how God worked in and through the people he chose (fallible as they were), and it shows God's exciting plans for the future as it powerfully predicts all that was going to happen to Jesus and through Jesus. And it even points forward to the ultimate fulfilment of that plan as envisioned in Rev 20; and this is probably what Mrs & Mrs Cleopas heard, on the Emmaus road, as Jesus opened the Scriptures, and their hearts burned within them!

But these two articles on the Jesus hermeneutic started when a friend said that Moses banned gay sex, and Jesus endorsed Moses laws, and so he felt that the ban should remain. So, last time, I looked at how (a) Jesus said that he came to fulfil the law and the prophets (as above) and (b) he showed that the individual laws aren't immutable. My logic for the latter is that Jesus was without sin, and yet he (deliberately?) broke some of those laws.

So I think we need to look at the **purpose** of the specific laws, e.g. not eating shellfish,<sup>[344]</sup> where, with modern refrigeration, that law may no longer be relevant. And the other principle we might apply relates to the question they asked Jesus: 'Which is the greatest commandment?' Maybe building good relationships is the overall plan and purpose behind those individual rules.

Gay marriage didn't exist in Bible times, so how do we interpret what it says about gay actions for this new situation? I see the (OT and NT) verses as primarily about negative motives, e.g. 'inflamed with lust', and I think that the **purpose** of those verses chiefly relates to avoiding damaging relationships. But if gay Christians fall in love, and want to form a mutually supportive God-centred bond and, yes, express their deep love for one another intimately, it seems entirely appropriate to see gay marriage as a positive.

Not part of the interpretive logic, I agree, but a gay couple who are affirmed by their church can uniquely effectively reach out to other gay people and show them God's love.

I understand that others interpret the Scriptures differently but is it such a fundamental issue that it could justify debarring gay couples from leadership positions, as some churches do? And might we even split churches in support of this interpretation? I feel rather that we should agree to disagree, affirm one another, and work together to bring in God's kingdom.

Paul Bev. 5.8.24

## 346 Preserve the unity – please!

Since starting to read Ephesians in Tom Wright's (NTFE) translation<sup>[339]</sup> I've appreciated his 'different' ways of expressing things: I've already mentioned his finding better ways to translate *dikaiosunē*, because 'righteousness' has too many negative connotations to convey the writers' meaning.<sup>[341]</sup>

Seeing Paul's emphasis in Eph 4 – *Make every effort to guard the unity that the Spirit gives* – I was struck by the difference between the NIV and Tom's version of 4:13a. (Bear with me, folks – this isn't just technical, it's serious – I'm desperate to avoid church splits over gay marriage.) I emailed Tom who very graciously replied – amazing, as he's such an eminent chap!

we all reach **unity** in **the faith** and in **the knowledge of** the Son of God<sup>NIV</sup>

we should all reach **unity** in our **belief and loyalty**, and in **knowing** God's son.<sup>NTFE</sup>

Look how different they are! 'Belief [in] and loyalty [towards]' is so much more about commitment to a person; similarly, having knowledge *about* someone is very different from actually *knowing* them. Luvvit!

One translator may read some Greek words looking more towards deepening our relationship with God while another may be looking, rather, for an accurate expression of Paul's theology, and they can end up with different emphases. Tom does both, of course, seeking to balance theology and relationship – but it is a balance. Anyway, here's his reply:

The key point of course is that the Greek root *pistis* doesn't easily translate into a single English term. It covers faith, faithfulness and hence loyalty, trustworthiness etc – all of the above and more.

And we all know an example the other way round: English only has one word, 'love' with which to express the four *different* Greek words. You see the problem!

Why is this significant? I'm trying again to illustrate two points. The first (above) is how translations can be strongly affected by the translator's overall Bible-view – then *we* have to *interpret* those English words, from our own overall Bible-view!

So if someone is advocating a church split on the basis of (our interpretation of our translation of) 'what the Bible clearly teaches,' then we should be very wary.

Secondly, concerning gay marriage, which is *more* important, specific ethical behaviour or how we treat each other and how we relate to one another – actions or attitudes?

Those who hold the traditional line will say they are maintaining the Bible's teaching on marriage. Absolutely, and I agree that marriage is under attack. People say that individuals should be free to express their sexuality in



whatever way they want, when they want, with whoever they want, ‘as long as we agree’, OK? No, that kind of licence can be destructive of relationships.

But a growing number of Christians affirm marriage-that-is-gay. We want to support those Christians who, being gay, want to form a lifelong, faithful relationship, with all the personal and societal benefits that represents.

For the sake of unity, I hope that traditionalists will tolerate those of us who have changed our minds on this.

Paul Bev. 12.8.24

## 347 Do we learn from history?

Have you ever experienced the love of God? I’m sure you have, or you probably wouldn’t be reading this; I certainly have in the past few exciting years. Do you want to share that love with others? Who wouldn’t?! Do you experience any barriers to sharing that love? How about (1) the image of God in the OT and (2) the image of God that Christians have portrayed over the centuries by their (our!) behaviour?

I’ve argued previously that the OT is essential because Jesus came to fulfil it, and it was the only documentation the early church had when God used them to turn the world upside down. When Jesus came into the world as a vulnerable baby, lived and died, and was raised, the way they viewed the OT changed. But the Pharisees (including Saul, before he became Paul) still thought it was about what you have to do to be acceptable to God.

The OT is a collection of various sorts of literature: I still believe it’s all inspired by God, but I now see it more as the history of a developing relationship, from the loving start – which went horribly pear-shaped (apple-shaped?) – through many centuries, as God led the people and they demonstrated 101 ways to mess things up.

I know that ‘what we learn from history is that we *never* learn from history’ – but we must!

So in the OT I see a *developing* view of God, from a war-like figure in Abraham’s day. And the fulfilment was Jesus showing how self-sacrificing love conquers evil, the realisation that set the world alight.

From personally knowing God-Jesus they must have realised that things like, ‘God told them to go into the land and kill every man, woman and child’ must be a reflection of the writer’s view of God, not a literal account of a voice from heaven.

God was inspiring the writers, yes, but you can’t change people’s minds overnight; as history shows, change is glacial. We know what the OT *says*, but what was God wanting to *communicate*?

My second stumbling block, the really bad behaviour of Christians (then and, sadly, now), is linked to misinterpreting the OT. So the antidote to an over-literal view is to interpret it in the light of what Jesus is like, e.g. spirit, not letter.

What I was taught as a new Christian [caricature alert] was that the resurrection *proves* that what Jesus said was true. He said he fulfilled the OT, so the OT is ‘true’; we then have to convince others of this truth.

I now believe in, have faith in, trust, the person *behind* the Bible. And I seek to learn from the way that relationship developed throughout history; and that must form my mind as to how best to relate to God and to one another today.

To me, the gospel is the (his)story of Jesus in fulfilment of the history of the people of God – we must learn from that.

Paul Bev. 19.8.24

## 348 Unity – why and how?

This train of thought started with NTW's striking translation<sup>NTFE</sup> of Ephesians 4:13a ('we should all reach unity in our belief and loyalty, and in knowing God's son'),<sup>[346]</sup> noting how strongly **unity is based on relationship**. So I pursued the hare of the word 'unity' and came back round to that same chapter. In 4<sup>2,3</sup> we again see that relationship is what unity is about – and again we see the strength of Paul's insistence:

Bear with one another in love; be humble, meek, and patient in **every way** with one another. Make **every effort** to guard the unity that the spirit gives, with your lives **bound together** in peace.<sup>NTFE</sup>

But the hare started as Jesus, on the night before he died, prayed for us:<sup>Jn 17:22,23</sup>

I have given them the glory which you have given to me, so that **they may be one**, just as we are one. I in them, and you in me; yes, **they must be completely one, so that the world may know that you sent me**, and that you loved them just as you loved me.<sup>NTFE</sup>

Totally about relationship. But note the purpose: **that the world may know**.

Now just imagine the negative impact on 'that the world may know' if there were a church split over the issue of gay marriage. For the sake of the kingdom, it must not happen!

So, those of us who want change must, as Paul insists, be **humble, meek, and patient in every way**, and not insist that we are right. On the other hand, those who want to keep the traditional view must be **humble, meek, and patient in every way**, and not insist that they are right.

If we pray 'thy kingdom come, thy will be done', then we must 'make every effort' – and what does that involve? It must start with noting that unity is about how we relate 'our belief and loyalty'<sup>[4:13]</sup>, not about specific 'beliefs' – in this case, the nature of marriage.

So when we do disagree over individual beliefs, how do we deal with it? Historically, speaking, badly! In a series of spectacular messes, we've even killed people over beliefs about baptism (yep! – read about the Anabaptists, if you don't believe me). To make matters worse, just add politics into it, as with Catholics vs. Protestants.

Thankfully, we managed to avoid massive splits over the issue of whether women should be allowed to lead churches, and hopefully we can follow the same pattern now, over gay marriage. We have to ask those who hold the traditional view to be gracious and loving enough to allow gay people – as we have with women – to take a full part in the life of the church, without feeling judged for doing so.

When the church had the grace to accept women as potential leaders, it made it easier for **the world to know**, because the world just can't credit the idea of God('s representatives) discriminating against women. Can you see the parallel?

Paul Bev. 25.8.24

## 349 Just a thought arising...

One of my readers who occasionally gives me theologically based feedback made these comments, modestly starting with, ‘Just a thought arising...’

In the book of Acts, we get a sample of some of the early Christian preaching. Love does not get much of a mention. In fact, love is by no means a dominant theme in the NT, as some such as David Pawson have pointed out. The NT message is that there is a new deal available – believe, learn and obey.

The theme of love is strong in the OT, specifically covenant love, the love of God for his people. The horrors of the OT bring this out because, despite Israel’s unfaithfulness and outright rebellion, God continued to love them and work to bring them back to himself.

On reflection, most of the explicit references to love in the NT relate to God’s love for his people and how they should love each other. Grace is a key word in some books, but in its original context grace is a relational word. The patron extends grace to the loyal follower and the follower expresses grace back to the patron. This was very much the language of the NT world. Our English translations use different words for grace from above and grace from below. Love in this context is about loyalty to one’s own. That is not a vast distance from the OT.

Pawson would argue that since this is the case, we are wrong to preach a message with love at its heart. I disagree. How we present the message depends to a large extent on the cultural context of the listener. Jesus did talk about God doing good to both righteous and sinner. He deliberately demonstrated God’s inclusion of the excluded. He exhibited an abundant divine generosity. Forgiveness, both vertical and horizontal, is central. And in modern parlance, these things are best described as love on offer for all. You get to experience that love by entering in.

This stands alone (why not go back and reread it?), but it’s less than 500 words, so...

To me, this gives theological support to my feeling that communicating the gospel today must be culturally relevant. Leading with sin and God’s condemnation does not create open hearts; it confirms people’s preconceptions of Christians as being judgemental.

When we lived in Africa, we found David Pawson’s teaching tapes really helpful – as did many others worldwide – but his name has appeared here before, as author of *Leadership is Male*. The main thing I objected to<sup>[153]</sup> was not his explaining his view, but how it was expressed: (paraphrase) ‘they’ say such and such but ‘they’ are being influenced by the world’s view; and so he provides (actual quote) ‘a clear, concise look at what the Bible teaches.’

Yes, of course Jesus is ‘the answer’, but we need to ‘communicate’ by our humble, selfless, service-centred lives; *then* we can tell them the gospel – the story of Jesus – and they can respond to God in their own way.

Paul Bev. 1.9.24

## 350 Just a(nother) thought arising

Last week, *two* of you sent me really helpful feedback – thanks! Here, a very striking sermon from the recent Greenbelt festival, a radical look at a very familiar parable. It’s as radical as that of ‘the Sower’ by one of our own beloved leaders, way back in 2018: ‘eye-opening and eye-watering’, I said.<sup>[12]</sup>

But this sermon was about my much-referenced<sup>[60,63,106,137,344]</sup> sheep-and-goats.<sup>Mt 25:31-46</sup> Let me remind you of Jesus’ very graphic description of the goats: ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’ I think Jesus wanted to catch our attention!

As I've pointed out repeatedly in my 'stick-poking' articles using this parable, the teaching seems to be that we get to heaven (or go to hell) according to whether we have cared for the poor and marginalised: 'salvation by works'? The preacher pointed out that 'some of the early reformers ... didn't like this passage' – an understatement, surely!

I think (though this wasn't the preacher's point) that the mistake we make is to analyse spiritual things as mechanisms – and then we argue about exactly how such-and-such works. In my student days it was whether 'filling with the Holy Spirit' was a separate and distinct stage in salvation, e.g. David Pawson vs. John Stott.

One issue the preacher did refer to was the 'presence' of Jesus at the communion/mass/ breaking of bread, what that actually meant, and whether only special people could say the special prayers.

And another was that it's not *whether* we 'help the poor', but our attitude and motivation when we do so – it's way too easy to be paternalistic and 'us-centred'.

But what first struck me about the passage is how long and laboured it is – 16 verses, and almost as many words as here. And repetitious: he says '*I was* <hungry/thirsty/a stranger>' nine times! Anyway, what did he mean by, '*I was*'? So maybe this isn't actually about the *mechanism* of salvation; could it be more about *relationship*?

And the preacher's main point? Maybe, when we 'do good' to someone, that person in front of us *is* Jesus ('*I was hungry*'). How different our attitude to that person would be! And could showing mercy be a form of worship? And in *not* recognising the presence of Jesus are we being goat-like? Ouch!

Paul Bev. 3.9.24

## 351 Fake or Fortune?

Sue and I love this TV programme: someone owns a painting they think could be by a famous artist, but could it be a fake? One thing we've learnt is the importance of the frame, which can offer important clues. And in general terms the frame in which a painting is set can be crucial: switch the frames round between an old master, a Victorian piece and something modern and they would look ridiculous.

Today's glorious artwork is the death and resurrection of Jesus and all it achieved. The frame is [Genesis to Revelation, the wrong choices that Adam and Eve made and the final judgement where God will sort out the mess we've created. What God did in and through Jesus enables me and you to reach that heavenly future, at our death or when Jesus returns.](#)

From my reading (esp. Tom Wright) and thinking and writing, I now think this *frame* is a fake! The artwork is genuine, but I'm guessing that the frame dates to the Medieval period. I don't believe that Peter or Paul or other early church leaders would even recognise it.

So I'm searching for the original frame; maybe it's something like this?

[Heaven isn't a place – well, it sort of is: it's the domain where God is.](#)

[God is loving and creative and creates relationship-based creatures.](#)

[And God creates a place to \*come\* and relate to those creatures.](#)

[Relationship isn't relationship unless it involves choices – which can go horribly wrong!](#)

God has a plan; God *comes* to a person who is willing to trust/have faith.

‘All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’ (blessing = God’s presence = heaven?)

Israel is then to be God’s **servant** through whom God can *come* and bless the whole earth.

Israel alternately gets it vaguely right, then horribly wrong.

God *comes* and dwells in the tabernacle (so tread warily).

God provides ten vital relationship pointers.

We/they make wrong choices; God provides the Torah to help.

God gives them a king. (‘Everyone else has a king!’ but was it a good idea?)

God provides a place to dwell – the temple. (‘Everyone else has a temple!’ a good idea?)

Torah and prophets point to a special ‘*coming*’ – the Messiah, God’s ultimate **servant**.

God *comes* to earth in person, in Jesus.

Jesus is God’s **servant** – a completely faithful **servant**.

Through his life and non-violent death, Jesus defeats evil, and rises from death.

God *comes* to earth as the Holy Spirit fills (overflows!) the hearts of believers.

God’s presence (heaven) now *comes* into the hearts of his faithful **servants** (us).

God will *come* to earth fully and finally; God will restore everything.

Something like that, anyway.

Maybe we need to take the gospel story out of its ‘going to heaven’ frame and put it back into its original ‘Thy kingdom *come*’ frame. It certainly looks very different if you do.

Suddenly, we see that the focus of the whole thing is **God**, not ‘me and my salvation’.

Paul Bev. 24.10.24

## 352 Fake or Fortune 2

I’ve had three email responses – really encouraging, thanks! First, a misunderstanding about what I’m ‘rejecting’. My friend had read, ‘The frame is: Genesis to Revelation...’, and wanted to know what I was going to replace it with! Sorry, the reject ‘frame’ was the *whole* of that paragraph, the ‘going to heaven’ thing.<sup>[351]</sup>

In fact, my faith now depends more than ever on the Old Testament; and also on ‘what will happen at the end’. Thanks to Tom Wright, I see eschatology as essential to this glorious artwork of the cross, resurrection and ascension of King Jesus. Previously, heaven was just a great place for the future.

The second email was from a friend who found it very encouraging. For several months he had felt very discouraged by ‘the church’, and he wondered what sort of ‘message’ we might have for the man on his street,

whose wife had died very suddenly. I guess that if God's overall 'plan' – my 'frame' – is to bring blessing to everyone on earth, then what this man needs just now is reassurance of God's love; certainly not 'believe in Jesus, and you'll go to heaven'.

The third was really helpful for my own journey. The email started, 'I imagine we'd all be comfortable with your broad outline' (my 'frame', in blue). He could see no actual errors in it, although he did insist that, when I talked of Jesus defeating evil on the cross, it was 'fundamentally through PSA' (penal substitutionary atonement).

That's where my seven-year writing journey began: I decided that PSA was simply wrong. I could see how unhelpful it was to many people's appreciation of God's love, so I argued against it. I was making the same mistake as I had in the previous 50 years!

I applied 'true/false' tags to everything and then tried to convince other people that I was right (my group was right). Maybe I'm overstating it, but I was setting myself up as arbiter of 'what the Bible teaches'.

'Fake or Fortune?' is a simple binary question, albeit sometimes with huge financial implications. Thankfully, that's not what art is about – hopefully not, anyway! Does the painting speak to you? Does it stir you? Are you a different person, having related to it?

So this 'frame' is a way of looking at (thinking about) the good news, one that helps me to appreciate just how wonderful it is. It's not, 'Are those blue statements true or false?' but 'Does that way of looking (thinking) enable the Good News to change me?' It does!

Tom Wright says that Paul's writings don't just tell us *what* to think, they tell us *how* to think. Should we be using Scripture just as a way to judge what's right and wrong? I now think we should look at it as God's amazing plan to bring blessing to the world now and in the (final) future, with the glorious Good News as the central element, and let all that change how we live now.

Paul Bev. 28.10.24

## **353 FF3: How to think – the mind of Christ**

This very much follows Fake or Fortune,<sup>[351,2]</sup> where I take Tom Wright's line that, for centuries, we've wrongly framed our thinking of the gospel as 'How I get to heaven'. And I ended last time with Tom saying that Paul's writings don't just tell us *what* to think, but also *how* to think. I was intrigued.

I asked Tom if he could suggest a book that expands on this idea – meaning one of *his* books – but his gracious one-word email reply was, 'Philippians'.

By chapter 2, I had some answers (Tom's translation): 'Bring your thinking into line with one another.' Does this mean that we have to agree about everything? Presumably not, so what if we disagree? 'Regard everybody else as superior' – not 'I know I'm right; you are wrong.' Also, 'look after each other's best interests, not your own.' Does insisting on my view hurt others? If so, I need to exercise real caution, maybe recheck my thinking, especially so if 'my' thinking is simply what I was taught, and never actually questioned. If Christians had not been willing to rethink, there would have been no Reformation!

Then we have that glorious picture of Jesus,<sup>[2:6-11]</sup> introduced by, 'This is how you should think among yourselves...' – so where we disagree, I need to go back and look at Jesus, and then do my thinking 'with the mind you have because you belong to the Messiah, Jesus.'

As I've mentioned several times, I have spent decades deciding what is right (*what* to think) and persuading others (first fellow Christians, then non-Christians) of 'the truth'. I shudder to think how much damage I've done in my life by my persuasive writing.

But aren't I just doing the same again, trying to persuade you that my way of interpreting Scripture – albeit following Tom Wright – is right? I hope not. I hope I'm urging us to be more humble.

Now I hope this won't come as a shock to you, but the apostle Paul was actually wrong in some of the things he thought and wrote. For example, I'm guessing he thought the sun revolved around the earth! And reading Tom's biography of Paul (where this thinking started), it seems he thought Jesus' final return would be soon, maybe within his lifetime, but his later writings suggest that he became less convinced he was right.

While Paul's writing does seem incredibly prescient today, he was writing 2000 years ago, so the idea of instant global communication, advances in modern medicine and the abilities of AI would have totally blown his mind.

Amazingly, God (I think) inspired Paul to write things that would help people, for twenty centuries, to work out what to think about issues he couldn't even conceive of. And Paul did so by insisting that we decide *what* to think by ensuring we think in the right way – with the mind of Christ – with humility – and that we disagree lovingly.

Paul Bev. 3.11.24

## **354 FF4: The mind of Christ on gay marriage?**

I'm asking here that some of you consider rethinking the issue of gay marriage. Why? Because if we get this wrong it could set back the progress of the gospel massively. So I'm going to put a couple of ideas across that I hope might help the situation.

Most importantly, I'm going to ask you how you (and the church at large) are going to disagree with me and a growing section of today's church who feel that *committed* gay relationships (marriages) are not 'living in sin'. We need to apply the mind of Christ<sup>[353]</sup> to our disagreement, so first here's my current thinking on the issue.

Sexual desire is a very powerful force, and presumably it's part of God's design because, without it, the human race would die out. So are we OK to establish that the desire itself is not evil? In the right context it can be a powerful 'cement' within a loving relationship.

As with any of God's good gifts, it's the misuse of that gift that's the problem, and we manage to invent many ways of doing that! Misusing God's good gifts is sin, right, so am I urging gay people to sin?

Last time, we noted that, by God's inspiration, Paul and others 2000 years ago wrote words that God could apply, by his Holy Spirit, to our lives in a totally different culture, climate, knowledge-base, etc. The crucial bit is deciding how to think, how to apply those scriptural principles to situations that the writers couldn't even conceive of.

The first change I made was coming to accept that some people are gay, full stop – you might disagree, mine is not to convince you. So, if someone who loves Jesus is gay, they have to decide how to deal with that sexual desire. (Not being gay, I'm nervous of what I say here.) Presumably, they might feel that God is calling them to celibacy, but what does the Bible have to say to them? If they fall in love, is there a God-honouring way for them?

The problem we have is that all the biblical references to gay sex are situations that are clearly evil, e.g. 'shameful lusts' and 'inflamed with lust for one another'; nowhere does it refer to the possibility of a committed loving gay relationship – presumably it wasn't part of people's thinking then. The moot point then is 'natural/unnatural' and what that might mean. What is 'natural' for someone who is gay?

Secondly, what are we going to do if you don't agree with my interpretation? At least three of the churches represented by my readers openly – or quietly and effectively – won't allow people in gay relationships to be involved in aspects of church leadership presumably because they are 'sinning'.

I find that difficult to square with what I quoted last time: ‘Regard everybody else as superior’ and ‘look after each other’s best interests, not your own.’

A difficult issue, I realise.

Paul Bev. 3.11.24

## **355 FF5: Pastor, what should I do?**

Warning: This is a spade-a-spade article.

Let’s suppose you’re a church pastor (maybe you *are* a pastor), and Chris comes to see you with a practical question. What will you advise? Chris has followed your thinking and believes, too, that the Good News is way bigger than ‘how I get to heaven’; the important point is that Jesus’ victory on the cross, with the resurrection and ascension, makes Jesus the Messiah, the Lord of the Universe, and one day that lordship will be fully seen, as heaven comes to earth. Praise God! Let’s bring heaven to earth now, as and where we can!

Here’s the practical issue: Chris has fallen in love and says, ‘I’m gay; what should I do?’

I know from my discussions that some of you are really not sure, some are nervously exploring the idea that maybe God really is wanting us to rethink the traditional view. But others are adamant, and some say that their churches will not allow Christians in gay relationships to take leadership roles.

Now I want to ask you to consider this not as an issue of biblical interpretation, or indeed of how our attitude affects how not-yet-believers relate to us – to the church – important though those are. How does this affect real people who know and love God, and who long to serve God with their lives?

I think I would now say to Chris something like, ‘Take care in your relationship with your friend; make sure you pray together; don’t allow your feelings to lead you into intimacy unless and until you believe that God wants you to be partners for life, then make a solemn commitment before God and before your friends and family.’

So if you hold the traditional view, and therefore gay couples are obviously sinning, what would you say to Chris? (Interestingly, what would you say to Christian couples you know, who are not married but are living together?)

Would you say, ‘It’s not really love, Chris, it’s Satan trying to tempt you to sin, and you must resist’? And maybe add, ‘Chris, this love for your friend can be agape-love and filial love, but you’d best avoid situations where you are alone together, lest you fall into sin.’ Well, what else could you say, should you say?! Difficult, isn’t it?!

And what if I’m wrong? Suppose all gay sex really is sinful. How will God judge me for the advice I have given to Chris? Think what damage I could be doing! Paul says we should actively flee from sin, and I’m encouraging Chris to consider living a life of ongoing sin! Difficult, isn’t it?!

And what if *you* are wrong? What if Chris really *is* gay and only feels that attraction to people of the same sex? You’re telling Chris to suppress any feelings of physical attraction, and you’re saying, ‘Sorry, Chris, you simply have to live a celibate life.’ Difficult, isn’t it?!

Paul Bev. 7.11.24



## 356 The mind of Christ, more widely applied

I was struck by Tom Wright's reply to my asking for 'a book about his "how to think"<sup>[353]</sup>', which was: 'Philippians'. As I read it, I noted Paul's insistence (Tom's translation):<sup>[2:2-4]</sup> '[Bring your thinking into line with one another](#)' and '[Regard everybody else as superior](#)' and '[look after each other's best interests, not your own](#)'. So I then tried to apply that to the issue of gay marriage<sup>[354,51]</sup> – a very pressing (and difficult) issue, so I think we must try.

I then continued to read on in chapter 2, but not before I was interrupted for a couple of days by thoughts of Matt 5's beatitudes, and Gal 5's fruits of the Spirit, both of which I try to drum into myself regularly, as they feel crucial. For example, 5/6 years ago, the fruit 'patience' kept coming up – Sue even made me a bookmark, embroidered with that single word. Given her diagnosis of Alzheimer's, two years ago, how prophetic was that! My (and her) having patience can transform things for us.

Anyway, after that glorious picture of what the Messiah was like,<sup>[2:5-11]</sup> I balked at Tom's translation '[work at bringing about your own salvation](#)' and then saw '[taking this with utter seriousness](#)'. So while this is clearly something really, really important, I know that some readers (and the Paul Bev of 12+ years ago) would have reacted badly to that translation. In the past, we've tried to play down the phrase 'work out your own salvation', knowing that salvation is by faith alone, not by works, and Tom seems to be making it worse: 'work at [bringing about](#) your own salvation'!

While the Reformation rightly challenged works as the *means* of salvation, I feel that we now have a view of salvation that's a thin shadow of Paul's view – hardly more than an on-off switch that we flick by 'praying a prayer of salvation'. (My homegroup is currently imbibing James, who certainly challenges this narrow view.)

Trying not to be too negative about my former view of faith, I do now see '[shine among them like lights in the world](#)'<sup>[v15]</sup> very differently. For me, what should 'shine out' is our quality of life (Mt 5 + Gal 5) and not our insistence that (caricature) 'we have the Bible, so we know what's right, and our job is to tell the world where it's going wrong, morally.'

Then add, '[There must be no grumbling and disputing in anything you do](#)',<sup>[v14]</sup> and I blanch slightly, thinking of the church politics I've been part of over the years...

I wrote the above a few days ago, but it didn't seem 'finished'; then I become aware of the implications of Justin Welby's resignation, and his own views about gay marriage. Now, however you feel about the Church of England, please would you pray for a Phil 2 + Mt 5 + Gal 5 outcome? Thanks!

Paul Bev. 15.11.24

## 357 Another Reformation?

A friend went on a five-day retreat and came back bubbling; she recommended a book, I read the prologue on Amazon<sup>61</sup> and ordered a copy immediately. Why?

I'm on 'The Way', a journey with Jesus, and, as a pair of walking poles, I've used these articles to help me. (Some articles have helped other folk – that's a real bonus!) When climbing a mountain, you sometimes look back, and there's the track below you – have I really come all that way?! That's how that prologue made me feel.

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<sup>61</sup> Brock and Parker, *Saving Paradise*.

*Some questions I started with:*

- 1) How come 'the Gospel' is so unpalatable to so many people? Maybe penal substitution is wrong theology?
- 2) Why is today's church not 'on fire', as it was in the NT days?
- 3) How could so much 'bad stuff' has been done, over the centuries, in the name of Jesus, the God of love?
- 4) How do you come to terms with the violence (God's violence) in the OT?

*Some helpful new (to me) ideas I've picked up:*

- 1) God wants restorative justice, not retributive justice.
- 2) Genesis is God creating a *place* to dwell with people; the Bible is God coming to dwell with people – but having to withdraw as we messed up – finally coming in the Holy Spirit.
- 3) Creeds only state (a) what God is like (Father, Son and Spirit) (b) what happened when Jesus came – purely the narrative.<sup>[18]</sup> It only says Jesus died 'for' our salvation, not 'how'.
- 4) 'Progressive revelation' – Throughout history, humans have gained knowledge; in the Bible, God gives us wisdom to apply that knowledge. "The people of the time thought..." applies to so many things, e.g. slavery, but God knows you can't change people's thinking overnight, so...
- 5) 'Accommodation' – God allows us to get our understanding wrong (including Bible writers!<sup>[315]</sup>) with the longer-term goal in mind – even to the extent of our wrongly understanding God's motives: God 'told them' to kill every man, woman and child.
- 6) Most recently, c/o NTW, the good news is **not** about 'me going to heaven'; it's about heaven coming to earth – now and in the future.

*Emerging thoughts, which that prologue echoed:*

In millennium 1 we focused on bringing restoration: Christ as Lord of individuals *and* over institutions (i.e. coming against systemic evil). In millennium 2 we focused more on exactly **how** salvation works. The focus moved from restoration (paradise) to the violent death of Jesus as ‘the answer’.

Instead of making the world a better place, it was all about individual salvation/damnation. This gave church leaders much better control, so ‘the system’ could work more efficiently.

The Reformation got us away from salvation by works, but it didn’t get us away from the centrality of death and violence. Christianity was still stick-based: ‘Get saved, or you’re going to hell.’ It got us away, too, from personal authority – ‘the Pope says’ – but it replaced it with reasoned theological authority – ‘the Bible (our interpretation of it!) says...’.

Maybe we need another Reformation?

Paul Bev. 20.11.24

## **358 ‘It’s not fair!’ ... ‘No, life’s not fair’**

Any parent will recognise this conversational extract. And it may even have occasionally reached the stage of, ‘I hate you!’ The parent loves the child, the child loves the parent, really, but some situations are beyond the child’s understanding. Indeed, some situations are beyond the parent’s understanding. Indeed, some situations simply do not have any understandability – and that hurts. ‘Why? Why? Why?!’ we cry (echoing the Psalmist).

Sometimes we give the child a simplistic explanation, and maybe sometimes, in our efforts to deflect the child’s anger and to give ourselves an easier life, we may even lie to them. But then the child’s knowledge grows, and it backfires. It’s not easy being a loving parent.

Look in the mirror, folks, and think what it must be like for God!

Like any good and loving parent, God wants to guide us, to increase our maturity, to help us see the destructiveness of some of our behaviours. But it’s difficult. ‘It’s not fair!’ is a powerful driver.

Humankind’s knowledge certainly is increasing, but what about our behaviour? What about how we treat each other?

Now to get back to one underlying question of my writing journey: how the hell – and I use that word advisedly – could followers of the way of Jesus ever justify using violence to sort out the world’s problems? What went so badly wrong, when and why?

If there’s one thing I’ve learnt, it’s that God’s heart is for restoration – totally and utterly. It’s us humans who insist that evil must be punished; otherwise, ‘It’s not fair!’ So, God wants restoration; we want punishment.

But God’s restoration involves grace – people **are** forgiven, people are **not** punished as they (we) deserve, and frankly that is **not** fair – ask the prodigal’s brother!

OK, the Bible does say that God ‘punishes wrongdoing’, but that is how **we** see it. As humanity matures over the centuries and, especially, as God demonstrates the ‘better way’ of the cross, we are hopefully (with many relapses along the way) able to work towards restoration of humans and of the world. But to do so, we have to accept a degree of unfairness.

In stages, over the second millennium, we have ‘explained’ God’s way, so that we get our cake (evil must be punished) and eat it (we don’t get punished).

What I’m beginning to see is that by insisting that everything has to be explained, by trying to explain our beliefs to outsiders, we’ve worked out a ‘fair’ version of the gospel where evil **is** punished – and we’ve illustrated that punishment in our art.

We’re not willing to trust God and accept that the mystery of the cross is beyond our understanding; we can’t ‘work out’ or ‘explain’ God. Trust God, accept forgiveness, accept that only God knows what is ‘fair’.

The **childish** response is a religion focused around punishment; the **childlike** response is to trust that God knows best, we can’t explain everything, and concentrate on restoration.

Paul Bev. 2.12.24

## 359 *Not sure why I’m writing this*

I don’t have a ‘message’ today, but I’ve recently been very inspired by a number of people, and at a time when there’s so much evil manifesting itself, I guess a bit of positivity – even if it’s not specifically ‘Christian’ – is no bad thing.

It started when, struggling to find any TV programmes worth recording, I stumbled upon the BBC interview series, *My Life at Christmas*, to which I was attracted by seeing the name Rev Richard Coles. I met Richard, briefly, around a breakfast table at an editors’ conference where, as an author himself, he was the keynote speaker. He was a joy to meet!

Sue and I knew of Richard as the host of *Saturday Live*, a Radio 4 chat show which often had inspiring stories about people’s positive actions, often in caring for others. Richard formed the 1980s pop duo The Communards which topped the UK charts for four weeks in 1986 and became the best-selling single of that year. He is also an openly gay vicar who, relatively recently, left the Church of England.

We really enjoyed the interview but what bowled us over was another interview in the mini-series of three by Sally Philips.<sup>62</sup> We’d never heard of Lemn Sissay, but he’s a multi-talented poet of Ethiopian decent, brought up by white parents in NW England. He shared how they had put him *back* into the care system after a ‘spiritual experience’ convinced these Christians that he was possessed – actually, it was faulting earth wiring on a bath!

His life and attainments and charitable work are quite remarkable. Whilst his faith might not be considered ‘conventional’, it was clear to us that God has used him (is using him!) very powerfully, in a thy-kingdom-come sort of way, and he is clearly highly respected outside Christian circles.

We then watched another series,<sup>63</sup> this time with Anita Rani as interviewer: Sheila Hancock, Rudolph Walker and Spencer Matthews, only the first of which we had heard of. All were amazing, seeing how – I would claim – God brought real good to the subject and to others around them in a thy-kingdom-come way without their having a ‘conventional’ faith.

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<sup>62</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001g56p>

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0025p0x>

To be honest, I'm not sure that God is too fussed about the exact details of a person's faith. If they are open and willing and keen to do something worthwhile then I feel that God is willing to use them – maybe quite powerfully – to bring good into people's lives.

Finally, my Tim recommended the consummate young multi-instrumentalist, singer and composer, Jacob Collier, currently in the middle of a world tour, at age 30! Tim and the family saw him in Paris recently, and were stunned. Sue and I watched a documentary<sup>64</sup> about him, and I was in tears at the end, seeing what joy a straightforward, humble guy brought to so many people. I'm certain God's heart is warmed, seeing how those concerts bring people together, despite their being no hint of anything Christian in Jacob's life.

Paul Bev. 19.12.24

## 360 Paul on Corinthian sex

A few years ago I found it really helpful when I studied Romans by 'aerial surveillance', and I've just done the same with 1 Corinthians – taken the wider view before dissecting verse by verse. First, I looked at The Bible Project's summary – many find TBP's videos *really* helpful – and I noted that almost a quarter (24%) of the book is about sex.

The Corinthian context was in many ways very similar to C21, where (misuse of) sex is very high on society's agenda, so we'd better pay close attention. TBP sums up 5–7 as: (1) yes, we're 'free in Christ', but that does *not* mean we can just do what we like; (2) Jesus died for our sins, including sexual misconduct – it leads to broken [relationships](#); (3) Jesus rose, and we too will be raised, so what we do with our bodies really matters.

Reading the three chapters, I was struck by the contrast between his list of 'blindingly obvious' sins and his 'here's what I think, but you must decide what's right/wrong for you'. But this teaching is really important because sex is such a powerful force for good or ill: it can cement [relationships](#) and it can – all too easily – destroy them. And it's all set in the context of what's really important: [relationships](#) that help God's kingdom to come.

Paul has some pragmatic advice in 7<sup>9</sup>: staying single means that you're freer to work for God's kingdom, '*But if you don't have power over your passions, then get married. Much better to marry than to have desire smouldering away inside you.*' (NTFE)

Now, if you hold the traditional teaching on gay sex – and maybe even think that church leaders should enforce it – I would ask you to zoom out from the few words about 'homosexuals' within that list of blindingly obvious sins (6<sup>9-10</sup>); try to apply the *whole* of 5–7, to help the gay folk in your church to know how best to further God's kingdom.

If they feel that it would not be right for them to fulfil their sexual desires, and that they should remain single, *we must affirm them in their decision as to what is right for them.*

But they may see: (the Bible's teaching on the centrality of faithful [relationships](#)) + (their sexual desires) + (Paul's practical advice above) and feel that, for them, it might be right to follow their hearts and risk falling in love, with a view to a possible lifelong commitment; and *we must affirm them in their decision as to what is right for them.* It won't be an easy decision, and the last thing they need is to feel judged (to be judged!) by others.

Finally, when you look at that list of blindingly obvious sins of 6<sup>9,10</sup>, do relate it to 5–7.

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<sup>64</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERvd5QjupSU>

Do you not know that *the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God*? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor *homosexual offenders* nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers *will inherit the kingdom of God*.

NTE takes a *really* hard line: '*practising homosexuals of whichever type*' ... will [not] inherit the kingdom of God. For once, I totally disagree with Tom Wright!

Paul Bev. 29.12.24

## 361 Gay sex – more issues

Many thanks for two feedback emails, which have given me more issues to discuss.

**General point** – First is to say that I've changed my views over these past few years because (a) I've challenged any and every teaching I've ever been given(!), and (b) I think (hope) I've taken more of an 'aerial view' of scripture.<sup>[360]</sup> So instead of just studying 'the verses about gay sex', I've looked more widely at Romans 1 and 2 and now at 1 Corinthians 5–7.

**My mistake** – When I first read Tom Wright's translation of 1 Cor 6:9 as 'practising homosexuals of whichever type', I reacted strongly because I misread him as referring to both male and female gay sex. This just shows how slippery language is, and how easy it is to jump to the wrong conclusions when you 'know what he thinks'. Sorry!

From the range of different Bible versions on, say Bible Hub, you can see that the Greek mentions two types of sin, but that some translations concatenate them, as for example, the phrase 'men who have sex with men'. But 'nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders' is what's behind Tom's 'both types'. So easy to misunderstand, sorry!

But they are definitely sins; they are (as I said last time) in a list of blindingly obvious sins.

**Translators' assumptions** – As I've reminded us before, whenever someone translates a passage, they have – to some extent – to interpret it before they can translate it. To convey the author's intended meaning, as expressed in the Greek, you have to decide what the author was actually trying to get across, and then work out how best to express that meaning in another language.

Tom's overall view is that the Bible sees *any* gay sexual behaviour as sinful (i.e. the traditional interpretation), and so his 'practising homosexuals' conveys that meaning – anyone who puts their gay sexual desire into action, in whatever context.

Indeed, the three obvious NT passages are all very clear (Rom 1:26-27, 1 Cor 6:9-10, and 1 Tim 1:9-10), because each passage parallels gay sex with murder, greed, depravity, shameful lust, prostitution – the list is endless, and all obviously sinful, and the interpretive argument runs that therefore *any* form of gay sex is sinful.

**Author's assumptions** – I can't prove it, but my guess is that Paul did indeed see all gay sex as sinful because I doubt that any gay men he met would have had the courage to admit it; certainly, they wouldn't have chatted over a pint with Paul about their experience of a loving, committed, gay relationship.

But, realising the assumptions of the Bible authors and the translators, we have to decide what Jesus would say to people who love him and want to serve him with their lives, and yet are gay. The Bible doesn't speak directly into that context, so it's difficult to decide.

(My copy of Tom's commentary on 1 Corinthians has just arrived, so I'll be back!)

Paul Bev. 31.12.24

## **362 Gay sex (explicit)**

(This contains explicit content, but I'm not aiming to shock, just to be honest.)

Good Bible students don't let feelings get in the way of their analysis of the texts or of drawing C21 application, but it may help to actually acknowledge what those feelings are. That's difficult, as this is an emotive issue, and we are all products of our past. Indeed, in seven years of writing, I have uncovered a lot about my own family past, and even from a NZ cousin's email, just yesterday.

Originally, I held a traditional view, which has the advantage of being simple. The Bible texts are pretty clear (and I still accept that) – they all say that gay sex is wrong, perverse(?), unnatural. Why is there any need for discussion? It was supported by my own sense of revulsion at what 'they do', although my feelings were more ambivalent towards female gay sex – just being honest.

Add to that the feeling that 'the world' is trying to push us down the 'if it feels good, do it' route. No, our job is to uphold God's moral standards!

I wish that, seven years ago, I had known two lovely Christian couples: Adam and Brian and Claire and Diane, real people (well, they aren't, but you know what I mean) who love each other in a deep and intimate way, and are wholly committed to one another and to God. They are happy and contented after years of singleness in which, as Christians, they were made to feel guilty and ashamed because of their sexual feelings towards people of the same sex.

What's more, through their faith in Jesus, they are able to reach out to other folk who are gay and to affirm them as loved by God for who they are.

But on the face of it, they are flouting God's moral standards, so where is God in this?!

I believe God gives us moral standards because sexual desires are very powerful and if we don't control them they will lead us into casual relationships which can cause terrible pain and heartache. But if we form unique committed relationships, then sexual intimacy – mutual stimulation within the security of total personal commitment – can be increasingly satisfying over the years and can really cement that relationship.

God knows the future, so the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the Bible to provide us with principles that we could apply in situations that they could never have conceived of. Ours is to read the Bible in the light of present knowledge, and apply those principles to allow people in C21 to live in love and commitment with one another, support each other through the trials and tribulations of life, etc.

Christians who are gay have been badly hurt by church leaders trying 'uphold moral laws' (as have Christian divorcees). Can't we just agree to disagree, and affirm and support each other, for the sake of those who don't yet know God's love?

Paul Bev. 2.1.25

## **363 'Love the sinner, hate the sin'**

One of my correspondents has just reiterated: 'love the sinner, hate the sin', and I would certainly describe this person as 'love in action'. So let's examine this idea.

Suppose it's me that's sinning – and going on sinning unrepentently – and suppose you're my Christian friend, what would I want you to do? If you really love me, you should jolly well take me on one side – maybe with another Christian friend, or a church leader – and challenge me, because I need to repent and stop sinning. Sin is serious!

My warrant for this is 1 Cor 5, for starters, though that's a bit of an extreme case; Paul says that even pagans don't commit that particular sexual sin. But maybe look at Romans 6: Paul addresses those who are 'baptized into the Messiah, Jesus' and are 'united with him' and yet they 'go on sinning'. So he reminds them (and me) that 'the wages of sin is death'!

From other things that Paul says, I don't believe he's saying that I won't ultimately be saved, but deliberately going on sinning while I'm trying to live in an open relationship with God is simply a contradiction in terms! So if I'm going on sinning, please take me on one side – I need to repent.

But hang on, what is sin? And what is repentance?

Jesus' companions said that he was without sin – and I believe them. Yet the 'church leaders' of the day (Pharisees etc.) said he was sinning, breaking the law. And we have recorded incidents where Jesus did break the Jewish law – he and his disciples.

A theologically trained friend said, 'Not everything is written as a moral absolute. The expectation of making everything into a moral absolute came later.' That set me thinking.

Our church services – certainly in the Cof E – encourage us to think of the wrong things we have 'thought, said and done' this week, and then to repent of them. We are regularly pointed towards seeing sin as 'things we do wrong' and repentance as saying sorry and trying not to do them again. It's all about sins (plural), not about sin as an attitude.

Might it be more helpful (more biblical?) to think of sin more as an attitude of mind; more about motivation, direction? Is our desire really to love God with all that we have and are, and to constantly love our neighbours as ourselves? Maybe repentance could be thought of as turning back to God and making that attitude of love more our *actual* priority?

So let's go back to the gay folk I mentioned<sup>[362]</sup> (Claire and Diane are real actual people – 'Claire' was a member of our homegroup for years). If you hold the traditional view, are you saying that we should see their relationship in moral terms: they are 'sinning'? Yet their total motivation is loving God, and loving the folk around them.

How would *you* define what is sin for Claire? Difficult, isn't it?

Paul Bev. 4.1.25

## **364 Knowledge puffs you up, love builds you up!**

Looking at 1 Corinthians, after being arrested by Paul's teaching on immorality, 5–7,<sup>[361-3]</sup> I was hit by 8:1, quoted above from the NTFE, which made me feel distinctly queasy. What am I doing? For years, I've been building up 'knowledge' and then encouraging people to change their minds about some of the things we've been taught in our churches over the years (centuries?). Am I not 'puffed up'?



Certainly, I have expressed some very strong views in my articles (and sometimes even disagreed with myself!), but I do still feel very cross that, right from the start, in my student CU, I was encouraged to feel that we were definitely 'right', and we had to stand up for what 'the Bible teaches'. One particular target then was the SCM (Student Christian Movement) who had 'gone liberal' and were 'reneging on the gospel' as we then defined it (penal substitution). Anyway, back to 1 Corinthians...

So I read through the whole thing, copiously applying a 6B pencil to Tom Wright's New Testament For Everyone, and I got the impression of a church trying to live in a highly sexualised society, and that also had a lot of issues over division – sounds familiar! Paul sets up front and central that 'King Jesus is Lord', and he had a lot to say about *building up*, our being a *temple* and a *body*, and helping us to know what to do when we disagree about things.

He says that what counters that *building up* is 'knowledge' – and Tom even puts the word in quotes sometimes: you think you've got 'knowledge'! In ch 4, I hear Paul speaking out strongly against people like me-as-a-student (and in following years): I felt it was my job to correct other people's wrong theology. Ouch!

When we lived in Kenya, there were many churches that had split over some theological issue. But I can't say it's 'them over there': I have friends here in Norwich whose church split when the leadership felt that God was leading them to invite a woman to be their new pastor. Indeed, when I was churchwarden, my CofE church decided not to invite women to apply for the job of vicar – we decided it would be too divisive.

So how do we apply Paul's Corinthian principles to the issue of gay marriage? How do we *build up* our churches and let *love* unite us? That's actually very difficult, which is why I'm persisting. It depends how strongly you feel about gay sex. If you feel it's clearly immoral, and yet people are persisting and setting a bad example, then maybe you should apply ch 5? You stop them taking leadership roles, but should you expel them from the church?

Of course, the Bible is very clear on God's ideal intimate, supportive, loving, nurturing relationship – a male plus a female – but how do we *love* and *build up* people who are gay? No easy answers, I fear!

Paul Bev. 7.1.25

## **365 First Corinthians in the real (C1 or C21) world**

I've continued my repeated readings through 1 Corinthians and it's not difficult to spot Paul's heart – *Jesus the Messiah* – he can't stop talking about him. And Paul wants by all means possible to declare the good news – who *Jesus* was, what he did and said, how we treated him and how God conquered and how *Jesus is Lord* now and *Lord* of the future. Paul wants the church to be *built up*, to be a multi-part *body*, a holy temple *building*, bound together by love, serving one another and serving the world at large, thus declaring *Jesus is Lord* – that's Paul's passion. (My italic reflects Paul's word usage.)

The Bible Project's summary of 1 Corinthians is: 1–4 divisions, 5–7 sex, 8–10 food, 11–14 the gathering, 15 the resurrection (+ 16 greetings). And there are disagreements and divisions all about of those – what a church! But stop and look in the mirror – isn't the C21 church just the same? 'Ah, but that's the established church!', you might say, but is your church totally free of disagreements? Really?!

I would suggest that we all need Paul's love-based, *body-building* approach, which involves, as in 8–10 on food, being very careful to check how my firm view about what is 'right' affects my attitude to my brothers and sisters in their faith. Insisting on *my* view may well hurt others so, yes, on each issue, Paul seeks to apply principles, but he does it in such a way as to *build* others up – and that should always be our motive.

It doesn't take a genius to spot the biggest and most potentially divisive issue for the church in C21, so what *body-building* principles are we going to apply?

Well, sex is a powerful force – for both good and evil – so can we all agree on some principles? It's so intimate, personal and potentially intrusive that it must surely be confined to the safety and security of a stable, unique, *life-long relationship* – and that means chastity before marriage and faithfulness within marriage. Agreed?

But things get a little less clear when we start to think about divorce. As humans, we can so easily get our relationships wrong, so we have to do all we can to minimise personal pain when that happens, and maybe the best way to deal with divorce is *not* to apply cast iron rules: 'the Bible clearly teaches...' Maybe in such situations we should think more in terms of *body-building* love. How can the real people with real pain best sort things out?

Divorce is not ideal, but we have to live in the real world, so now let's apply that to the elephant in the room. Male-female relationships are God's ideal – for populating the earth, if nothing else – but how do we apply the principle of *body-building* love when seeking to help those members of the *body* who don't feel male-female sexual attraction?

Difficult, isn't it?!<sup>65</sup>

Paul Bev. 13.1.25

## **366 Confessions of a recovering Pharisee**

If you've never had any niggling doubts about your faith then please don't bother reading this article; I have, indeed in 2011, I lost my faith totally, tried unsuccessfully to rebuild it, moved house and church, and slowly rebuilt. Recognising that I am a Christian Pharisee has helped greatly.

*Pharisee*: someone (like Saul/Paul) who is well-meaning, studies the Scriptures, tries to put it into practice, and tries to get other people do the same. But what's wrong with that?! Isn't that what Christians should do?! Well, sort of.

Anyway, I'm an ideal Pharisee – it's in my DNA. From my earliest years, I took things to pieces to find out how they worked and invented new things; I studied engineering at uni; I taught physics = learn how things work and explain that to others; I ran my own business = work things out and sell them to others; I became a book editor, where I worked out how to use computer programs to do my job (much) faster.

This last is a good illustration of my Pharisaism. I've written these programs for almost 20 years and am now a world expert (I give the programs away free); a friend and I train people in their use in editing organisations all over the world. The only editors group that is *not* taking them up is my own UK group. I wonder why?!

Over my 57 years as a Christian, I have certainly persuaded a few people to come to faith, but I do wonder how many other people I have put off by my attitude. And among my own family – the people who know me best – not one believes in Jesus. A sobering thought.

Sue and I do jigsaw puzzles – loads of them – and we've just completed the most difficult one ever. We struggled with this painted village snow scene for two days, almost giving up, when Sue said, 'Hang on! On the box it says: *Can you spot the 15 differences between the picture on the box and the puzzle itself?!*' The boy's red coat is actually green, etc.

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<sup>65</sup> If you just answered, 'No, it's very straightforward', maybe ask your Christian friends who are gay if they feel that they are a very important part of the *body of Christ* – because they are!

What if the ‘picture’ on the Christian box – what we’ve always been taught – is largely the right shape, but maybe some of the details are less clear than we think? Christians may not kill one another these days, but as born-again Pharisees, we look down on one another and split churches, criticising each other’s views.

If we approach not-yet-believers with an ‘I know I’m right’ attitude, it encourages them to argue back and causes polarisation – very similar to party politics, where each side knows that any idea ‘they’ come up with is definitely wrong.

Yes, I know that’s (my) human nature, but it’s what Paul was trying to get the Roman Christians to see: Ch 1 ‘Look at all the terrible things *they* do’; Ch 2 ‘But *you* do the same things, so stop being judgemental!’

Father, please help me to stop judging ‘them’.

Paul Bev. 22.1.25

## **367 Tom Wright or Jim Reeves?**

After my comments spurred on by reading Tom Wright’s translation of 1 Corinthians, I moved to the sequel, but nothing really came alive until I hit 2 Cor 5:1-5. Bang!

But first, remember how I keep saying that when a scholar seeks to translate a passage, they have to keep in mind their overall understanding of what the Old and New Testaments teach? They then work out what the current author (here, Paul) is saying and they translate it for us so that we too can (hopefully) understand what Paul was trying get across to his hearers + what God is trying to get across to us.

So Tom has used his extensive (and that’s a massive understatement!) knowledge of Paul’s teaching, and he has worked out what he thinks Paul is trying to get across in my five verses. Then he has decided what actual English words would best express that meaning.

Even then, when I read Tom’s words: I can see what Tom is saying, but what does Tom actually mean? The communication chain is God → Paul → Tom → me. How desperately we need the Holy Spirit’s help because ‘the word of God’ comes through the filter of Tom Wright – or whichever translation we ‘like’.

So what did I see in 2 Cor 5:1-5 that so exploded in my brain?

Since I have tried to rebuild my faith from scratch, the main thing I’ve picked up – largely through Tom, I think – is realising the completely unbiblical view that I have swallowed since I came to faith in 1968. It is well expressed by this chorus that I sang at that time on a CPAS boys’ camp, which I helped to run in the Lake District (a song by Jim Reeves).

This world is not my home  
I’m just a-passing through  
My treasures are laid up  
Somewhere beyond the blue

*The angels beckon me  
From heaven’s open door  
And I can’t feel at home  
In this world anymore*

Oh Lord, you know  
I have no friend like you

If heaven's not my home  
Then Lord, what will I do?

*The angels beckon me  
From heaven's open door  
And I can't feel at home  
In this world anymore*

What's wrong with that?! Isn't this what Paul talks about, quite often? He longs to be away from this troublous life, here on earth, and back at home (in heaven) with the Lord?

But no! Tom and I both believe in 'the resurrection of the body', as the creeds say. While it's not entirely clear (to me, anyway) quite what will happen to me when I die, I am now sure that when Jesus returns, in his awesome majesty, to (some sort of) 'new earth', I will have (some sort of) a new body. I'll be able to recognise you and you me (sorry!). We will not be disembodied spirits. We will 'put on our heavenly building' (NTW), i.e. our new bodies, 'on top' of these present bodies that are 'doomed to die'.

I'll let Tom speak for himself, and you can see if it strikes you as powerfully as it did me. At least it gives the lie to the Reevesian philosophy, I think. This world matters.

What is Paul's 'building'? Is it the *place*, 'heaven', or is it Paul's (and the Corinthians') new *bodies*?

(I've highlighted alternate verses, only to aid comparison between Tom Wright and NIV.)

NTW: For we know that if our earthly house, our present 'tent', is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house no human hands have built: it is everlasting, in the heavenly places. <sup>2</sup>At the present moment, you see, we are groaning, as we long to put on our heavenly building, <sup>3</sup>in the belief that by putting it on we won't turn out to be naked. <sup>4</sup>Yes: in the present 'tent', we grown under a great weight. But we don't want to put it off; we want to put on something else on top, so that what is doomed to die may be swallowed up with life. <sup>5</sup>It is God who has been at work in us to do this, the God who has given us the spirit as the first installment and guarantee.

NIV: Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. <sup>2</sup>Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, <sup>3</sup>because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. <sup>4</sup>For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. <sup>5</sup>Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

Paul Bev. 8.2.25

## 368 Fifty years a CP

I don't think I was being unduly hard on myself by saying that I had spent fifty years as a Christian Pharisee;<sup>[366]</sup> rather, I was being realistic. None of the people who know me best – my family – now follow the way of Jesus. (Or do they? They are loving, caring people who go out of their way to help folk in need; they just don't go to church.)

But as a CP, I would have said that I (we as a church) had presented 'the gospel' to them, but while they at first accepted it, they now reject it: their responsibility.

Having lost my faith, then gone back to the drawing board, I have had (do still have!) a lot of questions. And, let's face it, Christians do disagree (and have tortured and killed one another) on a whole range of issues, amongst ourselves and with those outside the faith.

In a sense they are all theological issues – about God-and-the-Bible – but it might help (or not) to divide them into disagreements on moral issues, ethical ones and questions of church order, but with political issues mixed in. Complicated!

As a well-meaning CP, just like the first Pharisees, I studied the Bible to find out what was right, and then tried to put it into practice – and what’s wrong with that?! Well, let’s step back and ask what is God trying to achieve overall for humankind? Why did God inspire people to write both the Old Testament and the New Testament?

Presumably, if people get to know what God is really like – different from the view of the gods in Abraham’s time (~2000BC) – we will love God more, love one another more and be more able to resist evil. Does that sound about right?

After ~500 years, God gave them the ten commandments. Then for ~1100 years God tried to work with those people, that specific ethnic group, trying to improve their ethical and moral sense, and help them relate well to God and to the people around – with mixed success! Then 400 years of silence. Then Jesus. We can read the story of what happened and how people at the time related to God-in-Jesus – it went horribly wrong, seemingly, but we know the end of the story!

So how does a recovering CP view that story, 2000 years later?

To me, the good news is about God; how God related – tried to relate – to a people, against all the odds (people are very contrary); how God came (Jesus came) and related to real people; how God came (the Holy Spirit came), and now relates to all people.

The ‘good news’ is not primarily about **me**, how **I** can relate to God; the ‘good news’ is not a **mechanism** – how I get saved; the ‘good news’ is not about **morality** – much less about ethics. The real good news is about a wonderful Person, in all three aspects, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Vague and waffly, sorry. Happy Valentine’s Day, anyway!

Paul Bev. 14.2.25

## ***369 A real eyeopener – thanks, Tom!***

I’m a ‘words man’ – I love following the meanings of words: Where are they used and why? Well, the *mot du jour* is ‘covenant’. And you’ve probably picked up that I’m a fan of Tom Wright’s translation, the *New Testament for Everyone*. So I typed ‘covenant’ into Bible Gateway, selected NTFE, and got a list of its 78 uses. But, hang on, ‘covenant’ only appears in the NIV New Testament 36 times – interesting!

You know, too, that I say repeatedly that what we call ‘the Word of God’ (in whichever translation) only represents the best attempts of scholars to tell us what *they* think is the best set of (English) words to convey the writers’ intended meaning, based on *their* understanding of what God is trying to tell us in the Bible as a whole.

Now, Tom’s excessive(?) use of ‘covenant’, relates to my feeling that ‘righteousness’, as mainly used to translate *dikaiosynē*, often conjures up in our minds ideas that were not what the writers intended.<sup>[341]</sup> And that was what triggered my eyeopener...

In NTFE, Tom renders *dikaiosynē* as ‘covenant membership’ (13), ‘covenant justice’ (11), or ‘covenant faithfulness’ (2). These are mostly in Romans, especially 9-10, and reading those two chapters was what caused my lightbulb moment.

As we know, ‘righteousness’ comes by faith (and faith alone!), not by works. But what exactly is it that Paul says comes by faith? Tom says it’s ‘covenant membership’ – that is, *membership of God’s covenant family*. Read it and see what you think, but I’m beginning to think that this is actually the whole point of the whole Bible: not, ‘how I get saved’, but how we (re)join God’s family.

A further hint is the book titles: *The Old Covenant* and *The New Covenant*. (A ‘testament’ is an agreement, a ‘covenant’.) *The Old Covenant* is the story of how the people of God went in and out of God’s covenant like yoyos! *The New Covenant* is the story of how Jesus came to fulfil all the predictions cleverly planted by God into *The Old Covenant*, and how Jesus’ death and resurrection fulfilled God’s plan: all of the nations of the world are to be blessed through God’s covenant people – first Israel, now all who have been brought into covenant membership by putting their trust in Jesus. One big long-term plan!

God brings us into his covenant community, we welcome others into that community, and we live to serve other people (whether they actually want to be part of that community or not). What a glorious vision of ‘Thy kingdom come on earth’!

*So then, while we have the chance, let’s do good to everyone, and particularly to the household of the faith.* Gal 6:10

Yes, of course, our faith is still about how we can be freed from sin, through Christ’s death on the cross, but the Good News is not about **me**; it’s about **God’s plan** for the world. Remember, the Lord’s prayer only uses ‘us’, not ‘me’.

Paul Bev. 27.2.25

## **370 An eyeopener, my foot!**

Last time, I got all excited and called it an eyeopener – covenant membership.<sup>[369]</sup> Well, let’s see when I mentioned ‘covenant’ before... Yes, here we are: I was all excited about ‘covenant relationship’ and saying almost exactly the same things *six years ago*.<sup>[7,42]</sup> Argh!

But to be fair to myself, seeing it in black and white in NTFE does give it legitimacy – it’s no longer just my idea. The thing is, it’s so different from what we’ve always been taught about ‘the gospel’ (about me and how my sin can be forgiven and I can get to heaven), so we have to unlearn and relearn – and that takes time.

Tom Wright’s translation, ‘covenant membership’ has helped me see the good news as: *Jesus has died, Jesus has risen, Jesus is King! His death cleanses us from sin to bring us back into God’s covenant. We’re adopted and receive a legacy: all the riches of Christ!*

So the good news is about God – it’s about God’s amazing long-term plan to bring everyone (all who are willing) into his kingdom of light and love and worship; and it’s about how Jesus fulfilled that plan.

There were covenants before, but they were all imperfect, because God was having to work with what people in those times *thought* God was like. But the New Covenant, completed and ratified by Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension, is the perfect, once-for-all covenant, and it’s based on what God is *really* like: it’s based on Jesus. Brilliant!

I’ve no doubt my explanation of all this is flawed, but I believe we’re heading in the right direction together. I think we’re moving away from a humanly prescribed definition of the ‘mechanism of salvation’, and towards the mystery of Jesus’ death cleansing us from sin and thereby drawing us back into God.

And while I'm rambling on, I think this vision of the glorious good news speaks strongly to people who are more sinned against than sinning – and we all know such people (we may *be* such people). Jesus' blood cleanses us from all sin – yes, ALL sin – including sin *done to us*. We are no longer soiled goods; we are washed clean. What a joy that is! Total release from all that has dragged some of us down for years. Hallelujah!

That's under 400 words(!), but I don't need to say any more – just rejoice in that amazing good news and praise God for all you're worth, because you're worth everything to God.

I think my next step has to be to soak up Romans 9-10 and Hebrews 8-10, as the main concentration of 'covenant membership' – so I never forget again.

Lord, let it be, for us all!

Paul Bev. 9.3.25

## 371 Yes, but what do YOU think?

I'm starting on a new tack this morning, and I do genuinely want to know what you think. So if you have time, maybe a few of you would tell me, and we can learn together. This is a journey, after all. All I have to offer today is a feeling about a general direction.

What I'm thinking about is: how do you lead someone – a friend or family member – to faith in Jesus? They are interested, so you want to encourage them in the right direction.

I know how I would have answered that up to, say, 10 years ago, but my thinking about what the good news is has changed. I would have taken them to some sort of 'gospel presentation', hoping and praying that they would respond and 'give their hearts to Jesus'.

Suppose for a moment that 'faith in Jesus' was about *knowing a person* (well, that's what Christians *say* it is). How might that change our thinking?

The old model is that there's an 'expert' who reminds you about your sin, tells you about Jesus and his death and resurrection, and then asks you to say a prayer of acceptance, OK? And when we had a mission, if we felt confident, some of us would be trained in how to be that 'expert'; we were given Bible verses to use and told how to bring the person to a point of commitment. (Sorry, but I cringe at the thought of it.)

But suppose for a moment that 'faith in Jesus' really *is* about knowing a person. How might that change our thinking?

My first thoughts are more about *listening* to my friend. *What do you know about Jesus? What do you think about him?* Maybe we'd ask: *What do you think about God? How do you feel towards God?* (Different from their thoughts about Jesus, I'm sure.) Maybe it might then be appropriate to share something about what happened in AD whatever?

I mentioned last time about people who are more sinned against than sinning<sup>[370]</sup> – like the person who was in my thoughts when I started this journey ('Jenny'<sup>[1]</sup>). How do we help them? Might God prompt us to ask what they felt about the existence of evil? Not sure.

I'm short of my (self-)allocated 500 words, but these are genuine questions – what do *you* think?

I guess it's different for different people, but my main feeling is that we need to listen to them – we need to know where they are at. What do they actually know about the person of Jesus, because 'Jesus', to a growing number of

people, is just a swearword. And many people of my generation only know what they were told, all those years ago, about a scary, disapproving God.

We've got work to do, folks! Let's at least talk to our beloved fellow believers, about how we might share the good news – but, yes, *listening* is key.

Paul Bev. 13.3.25

## 372 *I'm going round in circles!*

Going on journeys can really provide good learning experiences, as long as you have an open mind: Abraham leaving Ur for the promised land, or God's people escaping Egypt.

I've been on a journey for seven years and, just like God's people in the wilderness, I've been going round in circles: in two recent articles,<sup>[369,370]</sup> I got all excited, and then realised it was the exact same thing God had showed me six year ago – but maybe revision is good.

An exciting new thought occurred to me this week, but I now realise it's an aspect of what I wrote in 2022,<sup>[226]</sup> which itself was a reprise of what God showed me in 2020.<sup>[135,136]</sup> Anyway, if the message below strikes you, maybe look back at <sup>[226]</sup>? But none of what I write is 'right', of course, although hopefully I'm heading in vaguely the right direction.

We know that God wants to live in relationship with people – all people, if possible, if we are willing. My articles have traced this through, inspired by the likes of Walton and Boyd, from Genesis 1–3 to Revelation 21,22. All the while, God is trying to draw us away from living our lives focused around ourselves (sIn – which leads to sins) to living 'in ChrIst'.

So <sup>[226]</sup> traces how, over the millennia, God led us from the idea of capricious deities who zap you, soon as look at you, to a Jesus-like God. Remember, the OT writers, though inspired, didn't (couldn't) realise what God was *really* like (like Jesus the self-sacrificing Messiah-King).

Part of this change of understanding is about sacrifice(s). To placate the gods, humans used to sacrifice other humans, but then it became 'only' sacrificing babies. Even Abraham – the first trust-in-God advocate – thought God wanted him to sacrifice his own son, so God moved him over to 'only' sacrificing animals. (Yes, God used it as a 'type', but it was still a wrong understanding of God!)

OK, sacrifice is (was?) important: it says, 'sIn is a very serious matter', and God pointed to blood as a way of cleansing us. When we're cleansed, our relationship is restored.

Jesus brought the next step in reducing our obsession with sacrifice by *being* a sacrifice, a once-for-all sacrifice. But this is all to move us *away* from blood-sacrifice as a way of cleansing, to knowing that when God says, 'I forgive you', and we trust God (have faith in God) then that's it – we ARE forgiven.

Sadly, over the centuries (esp. 2nd millennium) humans have added their own 'how to be forgiven' ideas. The Reformation pulled back from the idea of being saved by 'doing' something (or paying monks to do things on our behalf), but we added the we-know-how-God-works mechanism: God's anger has to be appeased by a sacrificial death. Sorry, no!

No, when God says we are cleansed, we are cleansed, by faith, by simply trusting God, and not by trying to understand, explain, justify God's actions.

Paul Bev. 18.3.25



## 373 Thinking more widely

I noticed an interesting programme on BBC, and recorded it: *Eid live*. It was the first ever live broadcast of a service from a mosque. It was fascinating, and the Bradford mosque was a really beautiful and inspiring building.

It started with a presenter explaining a bit about the significance of Eid (which marks the end of Ramadan); then he interviewed two Muslim ladies about their view of Eid, before the service itself started. One of the first items was a sermon (in English!) – I listened to the first 10/15 mins, before I decided I had heard enough (anyway, Sue was also watching).

This is hardly a statistically significant survey of the wider Muslim world(!), but the message I got from all four speakers was the importance of being conscious of Allah and of doing good and of being in community. (That reminds me: some years ago, a friend lent me a book that he was given by an imam he met on holiday, a children's book all about Islam. I was fascinated to learn, but all it said was: be good and obey your parents.)

Don't get me wrong, being aware of God, being good, and supporting one another is important, but this led me to wonder what the overall message of Islam was/is, so I asked an AI: *What is the main message of Islam in 500 words?* (Well, I limit myself to 500 words, so why shouldn't they?!)

Then having set this hare running, I asked it about the other four major religions. The results are below, but I've marked them with highlight (sorry), as I reacted to their messages. That might bias you to my views, but it might enable you to scan the 3000(!) words more quickly. And I asked a couple of supplementary questions, although I put my final 'summary' question up at the start.

Anyway, there it is, for what it's worth, and I'm off now to rewrite the Christianity one, in the light of my own journey from What-we-were-always-taught-ism to Could-this-be-more-like-it-ism.

Interestingly, the one I reacted to most positively was that about Judaism.)

Paul Bev. 4.4.25

For the AI output of these questions below, see article 373.

What are the five main religions of the world?

What is the main message of Hinduism in 500 words?

What is the main message of Judaism in 500 words?

What is the main message of Buddhism in 500 words?

What is the main message of Christianity in 500 words?

What is the main message of Islam in 500 words?

What do the five main religions say about suffering?

Why is Friday the holy day for muslims?

## 374 Thinking more widely – 2

When I looked at the ‘main message’ of five major **religions**<sup>[373]</sup> I was very unhappy with the Christian one and decided to rewrite it, partly based on Paul’s reiteration of the ‘good news’.<sup>1 Cor 15</sup>

God is love, and so God created the universe and created humankind and wants to live with us in a loving relationship. Love involves choice, and choices can go (very) wrong.

[Unsure about this bit...] Wrong choices can be made in the unseen heavenly realm too, hence the existence of evil, pointing humans in the direction of wrong choices.

But God has a millennia-long plan to improve the lot of humans and to enhance humans’ relationships, with God and with one another. The plan started local and individual, with Abraham, but always with the intention of bringing God’s blessings to the whole world.

The plan involved God trying to lead a people, Israel, through the centuries, through inter-tribal wars, conquering and being conquered. The people followed God’s plans... and then again failed to follow them.

The crux of that plan was God coming to earth: Love risked all; Love become a tiny baby. Jesus spoke about and demonstrated God’s way of relating in love. Jesus faced the worst of human evil, was tortured and killed, but rose to life again, was seen alive by many people, and then returned to his place as the central hidden power of the universe.

This ‘good news’ was heralded by the first followers of Jesus, who showed how all these events had been predicted in the *Jewish sacred writings*, even foreshadowed within the history of Israel, especially in the crucial event of their release from bondage in Egypt.

That release had been celebrated for 600 years by Israel (who sadly turned into a **religion**), but Jesus’ first followers suddenly saw how the death and resurrection of Jesus had been prefigured by the blood of the sacrificial lamb at the start of the exodus. (“Didn’t our hearts burn within us as he opened the Scriptures to us?!”)

Remembrance of this new ‘exodus’ became the central illustration of release, redemption, homecoming, salvation. To this day, it causes Jesus’ followers to love and worship God.

In anticipation of the day when Jesus will return and finally and fully restore all things, we do as much restoration work as we can here and now, for anyone and everyone.

How does that sound?

Sadly, we turned all this into a **religion**, with binding rules. Sadly, too, for the best part of my Christian life I have assumed that my (my church’s) interpretation of the Bible was right: I followed the **Christian religion**. I was a very-well-intentioned Christian Pharisee, the kind that Jesus spent years trying to counter.

Late in the day, I know, but I’m now trying to follow the ‘Way of Jesus’, relating to one another, learning from one another, being willing to change and to adapt my interpretation of the Scriptures in response to our God-given, growing understanding of God’s creation.

## 375 Jesus and the OT

In a discussion with a friend over how we should view the OT, I said that I couldn't see Jesus saying, 'Yes, my Heavenly Father told the Israelites to kill every man, woman and child...'. For me, such passages were written from the limited view of God that the authors then had. My friend agreed that these were 'difficult' passages but pointed to Jesus saying that he had come to fulfil the Scriptures, and that 'not an iota, not a dot' should be removed. Here it is:<sup>[Matt 5]</sup>

<sup>18</sup>I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. <sup>19</sup>Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

But if Jesus is saying that **every single commandment** remains valid, how about this one?

<sup>18</sup>If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, <sup>19</sup>his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. <sup>20</sup>They shall say to the elders, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard." <sup>21</sup>Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death.

So did the early church stone its rebellious sons to death? I'm guessing not. We can read what Jesus **said**, but what did he **mean**? And in what way did Jesus **fulfil** the OT?

As I read the above passage,<sup>[Deut 21]</sup> my eye strayed to the following two verses:

<sup>22</sup>If a man guilty of a capital offence is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, <sup>23</sup>you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because **anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse**. (quoted in Gal 3:13)

Isn't it amazing how God inspired the writers to give us what I call a 'chain of clues'. The early church, must have studied their 'Bible' (OT) and excitedly shared their findings, one by one, as they saw how the whole of the life of Jesus had happened "according to the Scriptures".<sup>[1 Cor 15]</sup> **That** is (part of) why we need the OT!

I really sense the early church's excitement in seeing the incredible **good news**: God is working (and has been for thousands of years) on a grand restoration plan, which will one day culminate in Jesus returning to earth in triumph – it's all there in the story of Israel, fulfilled in the story of Jesus: his life, death, resurrection and glorification!

Knowing the **purpose** of the OT stops us finding it so difficult.

Paul Bev. 14.4.25

## 376 Once upon a time...

You're reading a book and as the story runs, you see what's going on, where the story is heading, what the book is all about... but then, in the final chapters, something happens, something is revealed, and suddenly your whole view has to change. If you were to reread it – knowing what you know now – the whole thing would look totally different.

The absolute brilliance of the Author of the Book I'm thinking about is that it is actually a *true* story about *real* things that happened to *real* people. In the latter Part of the Story, you suddenly understand how the Author was actually working *inside* the Story; the Author became *part* of the Story – a kind of autobiography – brilliant!

But if you only read Part II, without knowing Part I, you wouldn't see the amazing significance of the things that happened; the things people said wouldn't make sense: Part II is totally founded on Part I.

Now, the way we read a given story – what we understand from it and how it affects us – will depend on what we think the purpose of that story is. So what do we tell our children the Bible is about? How much do we say it's about how we should *behave* towards each other? How much do we say it's about how we can, despite being sinners, be acceptable to God? That's the good news, right?! The Bible's purpose is to show how we can be saved.

Well, no; I now think the Bible is actually about God – not about me – about God having lovingly created the universe, including autonomous creatures, and how God has a multi-millennial plan to live in a wonderful loving relationship with those creatures.

It's about how God works to 'civilise' those creatures, enabling them to live together without killing one another... clearly, a work in progress! But the crucial stage was when God somehow became *part* of that creation, actually became one of those creatures – yes, impossible, I know! God's plan is continuing, to increase people's understanding of one another, and ultimately God will create a scenario where there is no evil at all; all will be love; all will be God.

What about that? Complicated, isn't it? Difficult to get your head around? It's far easier to see the purpose of the Book as being to tell us how to get saved. *Much* easier to explain – it even fits into a booklet.

People in Part II got passionately excited about The Good News, which to them was how the (true) Story of Jesus fulfilled the (true) Story of God working with and through Israel to bless the whole world, and *part* of that Story involves individual salvation.

Jesus preached that same Good News – yes, even *before* he had died and risen! He showed how he was fulfilling the predictions of Part I.

'Do you remember how our hearts were burning inside us ... as he opened up the Bible for us?'<sup>Lk 24:32</sup> It now sets my heart on fire, too!

Paul Bev. 20.4.25

In case you think this is my own silly idea, here's what N.T. Wright says in his foreword to the book I am now (re)reading, Scott McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*.

Well, you say, but isn't the gospel about salvation? Yes and no, replies Scott (quite rightly). Why, after all, did the early Christians call Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John "the gospel" (not "the gospels": one gospel, four tellings, was how they saw it)? Answer – according to Scott, and I'm convinced he's right: "the gospel" is the story of Jesus of Nazareth told as the climax of the long story of Israel, which in turn is the story of how the one true God is rescuing the world.

## **377 PS – a persuasive illustration?**

Don't get me wrong, I think ClassicFM is doing a great job, enhancing the lives of millions of people by persuading them of the value of classical music (weekly figures: 4.4 million) – but this has sparked an illustration.

Background: I lost my faith totally in 2011 ('Does God exist, even?!') and tried to rebuild it, but in the way I had always been taught, and I wasn't convinced! In 2017, at a new church, I felt I had permission to ask those difficult questions that, as Christians, we often suppress. And, as you might have noticed, I've found something I really do believe in, and am excited about; I'm like a sort of 'preacher' – hence my looking for illustrations.

Apart from the adverts (one more jovial discussion of incontinence pads, and I'll scream!), I get fed up with the repetition of what some Radio 3 listeners disparagingly refer to as 'lollipops', like *Nessun dorma* or *Largo al factotum*. Even those who don't know the titles would instantly recognise them, and can enjoy them – well, if they aren't played *too* often! But how many of us (not me) have ever seen them performed as part of an opera?

To watch those operas, in costume, would be a totally different experience. *Nessun dorma*, say, is just one part of an experience that communicates potentially life-changing themes through the medium of story.<sup>[376]</sup>

A weak illustration, perhaps, but it's how I feel about 'the gospel'. In 1968, I encountered a quality of life (at Scargill community in Yorkshire) that instantly grabbed me; then, at the Freshers' Sermon in Cambridge, I heard 'the gospel', was totally persuaded, and 'gave my life to Jesus'.

I'm an engineer, an analyser, a problem-solver, and I like to know how things *work*, and that preacher 'explained' salvation, and I'm very grateful. However, after losing the lot, I was asking why and how could something so life-changing, world-changing, history-changing in the first century have become so difficult to 'sell'?

At first, I heard the voice telling me, 'It's not our fault – the devil has blinded the minds of unbelievers'. But I now think it *is* our fault: we're offering people *Nessun dorma* – good as it is – instead of the full opera.

In 1968, I responded to those persuasive voices that told me I was going to hell, but God had a plan to save me. They didn't call it penal substitution (PS), but that's what it was.

Scott McKnight (supported by Tom Wright)<sup>[376]</sup> sees PS as a way of helping us understand personal salvation – but that is just *part* of God's overall restoration plan for the universe, and PS is used to persuade people to join in.

I now believe that the real good news is that **the true story of Jesus** fulfils all the predictions of **the true story of God's** dealings with one people – as seen in 'the Bible' (as the first believers had it) – for God to completely restore the universe, starting now. And that's worth shouting about!

Paul Bev. 21.4.25

## 378 The heart of an evangelist?

I've gone relatively quiet of late (two weeks!), but it's because a friend recommended Brian McLaren's *a Generous Orthodoxy*, and she was right: it has resonated big time with my journey. These past seven years, I've travelled from the **massive negative** of looking back and asking how, in God's name (see what I did there?!), people came to do such terrible, terrible things in and through the church in the past few centuries...

...to the **massive positive** of seeing the panorama of what God has been doing, over millennia, to move humankind forward in our job of co-caring (with God) for one another and for the planet. But that's despite the well-meaning mess that we have (I have) created.

Specifically, I shudder to think how many people I have helped to turn *away* from God by my well-meaning attempts to persuade them to turn to (my version of) faith in Jesus!

Today, I'm being more personal than I like, but can you help me, please? Do you think I have the heart of an evangelist? Here's the historical evidence...

For 20 years (1987–2008), I published a monthly computer magazine and, after the first few issues, I (weirdly!) put a half-page (A5) ‘Godslot’ in every single issue, and I have met people who were helped to faith through it, often as I chatted to them by email. But how many *more* were persuaded that Christians are arrogant people who seek to justify things such as the genocide that God ‘told the Israelites’ to do.

In 1993, at a youth service (as churchwarden, I was sitting at the back to ‘check it out’), they called me forward for prayer, and I experienced a burning sensation in my feet. They felt it was for evangelism – ‘the feet of him who brings good news’. Later, I received another gift, which I called ‘tears for the lost’, which lasted for a several years. Every time I spoke or wrote about people who didn’t know Christ, tears would well up. (Whoa, here they come again!)

As I’ve said,<sup>[274,275]</sup> I’ve been a life-long persuader, but does that make me an evangelist? (OED: *A person who seeks to convert others to the Christian faith, especially by public preaching.*)

Actually, that’s not the important question. What we need to know is: what is the evangel? the good news? the gospel? What gifts did the early evangelists (e.g. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Peter and Paul) exercise? Brian McLaren is further confirming my belief (picked up from the likes of Tom Wright and Scott McKnight) that while they did call people to repent (to turn and see things differently, to recognise how they had got things wrong), evangelists weren’t primarily ‘persuaders’ but story-tellers.

The Holy Spirit helps people to see how the story of Jesus massively and wonderfully fulfils the story of what God was seeking to do (despite their and our getting it horribly wrong) in the lives of us all and of our (God’s!) world.

Paul Bev. 5.5.25