

## ***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 **un**explainable, 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