

## ***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 [1], 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’ [0]) 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 [96] and [97].

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 [96] and [97], 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 [96, 97], 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