

The world looks different now!

Looking back over my 74 years, I can see God at work. From a highly dysfunctional family, I found (Christian) love at age 18 and welcomed it with open arms. I learned about the faith in an Evangelical setting, but the feeling of love waned. I rediscovered that love dramatically at age 35 through the Charismatic movement... but then lost it again. At 63, I lost my faith altogether: Does God exist even?!

I tried to rebuild my faith, but on the old familiar lines, then at 69, on moving house and changing churches, I rediscovered God's love again – big time! Five years on, and that love is as strong as ever – stronger, maybe. But how could I have been a churchgoer all those years and yet **not** felt God's love?! So I've fought to understand: what has gone so wrong with me? Why has it been so difficult for me to experience God's love in today's church?

I've faced many tough questions about the Bible and about faith and about Christians and about God, and I've processed those questions by (reading books and) writing articles – longer articles at first and then eventually trying to limit myself to about 500 words a time.

This process of radical thinking has helped me, and I'm led to believe that one or two folk, who have had similar struggles, have been helped by my articles. A run of 13 articles from mid 2021 has seemed particularly significant, so I've revised them slightly and present them here now, in case others might find them helpful. Shame it's not 12 – that would have given it more gravitas – but I guess it helps to stop me taking myself too seriously!

I offer these articles full of radical suggestions – I hope not too radical – in case you're keen to rethink your own faith. But because the ideas are so provocative, I wouldn't think it would be helpful just to read them right through – maybe read one article at a time and then see if you might want to risk another, and another, as the days roll by. Just a suggestion.

Hoping that some of the below rings true for you,
and may God really bless you!

Paul Bev. 19.11.22

The references in square brackets are to earlier articles, such as these,^[145–157] and they are all accessible on my website at: <http://www.archivepub.co.uk/thoughts>

At the end of this document is a list of the books that I have found specially helpful.

145 History of the world

As the proud owner of an O level grade 9 in history,¹ I will now give you 4000 years of world history in 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 God 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 God 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.

~1500 BC – They entered the promised land, which God wanted them to take over by **trusting** him to drive the people out, but instead they did it by **smiting** the inhabitants.²

~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 certainly inspired those OT writers!

By 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 God 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 **Part 2**.

¹ 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!

² This is Greg Boyd’s thesis in *Cross Vision*. See articles [125–128].

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 (i.e. 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...)

Paul Bev. 7.7.21

146 *Changing our minds (Part I)*

As I said last time,^[145] 4000 years ago, God had a massive job on his hands. At the time, everyone thought that the gods (and they thought there were lots of them) were angry and needed to be propitiated but, thankfully, God knew otherwise. He spotted Abraham and realised he was a one-off.

Abraham was a man of faith (trust); 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 loving blesser, not a smiter.

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.^[124–129])

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?^[145] 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 and 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 beneath 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 people feel in my church if we know that they are ‘doing things that Christians disapprove of’?!

So what *actually* is our view of God?^[145] 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 and welcome us home!

Paul Bev. 11.7.21

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 too. Brilliant, just brilliant!

Now I know why the Good News exploded!

And just look what happened to my namesake, Paul. 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 than the other disciples³ – 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.^[145] 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 OT Scriptures (Paul's 'Bible') 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 that Paul couldn't manage to write in short coherent sentences. It all just came tumbling out. He was just so excited by what he had discovered.

³ I'm guessing that is why he wrote so much more of the NT than the others – I'd never thought of that before.

And he found it by being willing to start from scratch and put aside what he had always been taught and to reexamine the Scriptures in the light of Jesus' teaching, Jesus' example, Jesus' own use of the Scriptures – the same God-inspired Scriptures, yes, but they needed **reinterpreting** – seeing in a different Jesus-inspired light.

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 did sort of know 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!

Paul Bev. 12.07.21

148 *Changing our minds (Part III)*

I know I have this thing about seeing patterns, but the great plan of God^[145,146] 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 rebirth of my own faith.

– Emphasis on Celtic spirituality and monasticism, but 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*.^[124–129]

– 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*.^[50–54,57] So our evangelism starts with God’s amazing love, not with God’s wrath.

Thank you, Father, for your amazing love.

Paul Bev. 13.07.21

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 this: Is it ever right to change our minds about *some aspects* 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.^[147] He first 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 changed his mind about the meaning of at least some 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 do as much reinterpreting as Paul did, but I do want to remind us of the conflict (deadly for some) that has come over the years where people have (rightly) tried to reinterpret the Bible to challenge the currently 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/evolution⁴
- ‘beating children is part of God’s way of discipline’

And I’m sure you could think of others.

⁴ My appreciation of creation has been considerably enhanced by Walton’s *Lost World of Genesis One*.^[130–133]

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

150 Changing our minds V – Flood

My 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 (my bold):

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

Wow, I’d never seen that before! Despite the view of the writers of the book of Genesis, 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,^[130–133] 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 relationships with one another and with God. But if we **trust** God (point one), if we have **faith** in God (point two), and if we **work together** (point three) – God will protect us in life’s storms. (Note, I said, ‘in’, not ‘from’ the storms.)

So yes, **we** do *our part* – get together and build the boat (Noah clearly 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) – that is God’s one-sided promise of protection. Not, ‘**If** you do so-and-so **then** I will look after you...’ but just ‘I **will**...’ Again, what a counter-cultural image of God!

My friend might then 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 being 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, to some extent, a wrong view of God; thus we catch glimpses (through the Holy Spirit’s inspiration) of the real, loving, dying, self-sacrificing God (Boyd’s *Cross Vision*^[124–129]).

And today, are we humble enough to admit that we too have a wrong view of God? If so, as we read our Bibles, 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 that of people in previous generations.

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’^[145] was based on a diagram that I drew/wrote (see below – but in retrospect, I don’t quite understand what I meant!), 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 ‘violent gods, needing to be propitiated’, to a loving Father, racing down the road to greet us (the prodigal Father) – 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*. (To be fair, 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 spreading like wildfire? Or have I, of late?

In my past church experience, we have mainly focused on personal salvation – I ‘open the door and let Jesus into my life’. And we say that our church is ‘cross-focused’, but mainly in the sense of ‘getting saved’ and therefore ‘going to heaven’. Then for those who are now ‘in’, we try to 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.

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
Mass slavery
Gay persecution
Commercial domination
Commercial slavery
Earth exploitation

AD
2000

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 (Aikido
principle)

CHRIST'S
KINGDOM

Love prevails
Explosion of love
Community (Celtic
Inclusion Xnty)
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 about: What does the Bible actually teach about sex, sexuality, gender? And today I'm thinking about gender in relation to leadership. **So what does the Bible teach?** [Devil's advocate warning!]

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, releasing women to play their individual God-given roles. 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!' i.e. I'm not going to change my interpretation.

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. So let us pray, be humble, and be gentle with one another.

Paul Bev. 29.7.21

153 Changing our minds VII – Beware binary thinking

Being unqualified in history hasn't stopped me writing 'A history of the world in 500 words',^[145] 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 – I'm sorry, 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' (the opposition) 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.' And the preacher of the sermon 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 the book nor the sermon seemed prepared to accept that their view was actually based on an *interpretation* of Scripture, but rather they presented it almost as fact.

Neither seemed humble enough to accept that it is possible for Christians to have different interpretations, let alone to *change* their interpretation over time, in the light of new information and new understandings.

Both pictured the opposition as having been influenced by 'the world' and used emotive arguments instead of simply presenting their views. For example, both said something like, 'Some Christians are changing their beliefs because they are not willing to face up to the difficult truths of what the Bible actually teaches.'

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’*

This is 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 – what about 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 as I awoke yesterday led me to think of ‘we with unveiled face behold the glory of the Lord’, so I looked up 2 Cor 3 – typically ‘excited’ Pauline writing – 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. 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 – and we think that is what it means to be ‘salt and light’.

But we even do it to each other within the church! 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 back *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 they tell us.

The book I referred to above^[153] 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 that the principle we should read from the relationship of Adam and Eve is that Adam’s sin was that he *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 (to be fair, the book 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 own interpretation **back** into the translation, and also, are we taking sufficient account of the cultural influences both 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?

Five 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 few 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 all believe exactly the same things 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 (perhaps overstated) from a late 2018 article^[12] of the alternative that Jesus was offering:

Religion	Relationship
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^[72] here is an illustration of how we misinterpret and misuse Scripture by applying it to the wrong audience. We think that if ‘it’s a scriptural truth’, it must apply to everyone. No! By taking a verse out of context and applying it to someone different we could be distorting and misusing the Bible:

Scripture	Spoken to	About	We apply to	To say
Romans 6:23 (the wages of sin)	believers	life in Jesus	non-believers	Repent or perish!
Romans 1 (wrath of God revealed against sin) ^[8]	believers	Don't you dare judge other people! Rom 2:1 ^[8]	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

And in retrospect I can now add two more:

Hab 1:13 (God cannot look upon sin)	the prophet arguing <i>against</i> God	I don't understand why you use evil people to punish us	non-believers	God cannot look upon you because you're a sinner
Rev 3:20 (anyone who opens the door...)	a totally self-righteous church	metanoia (turn) back to the Father!	individual non-believers	open your heart and 'let Jesus in'

Next time, I'll mention some specific ways my own interpretation has changed – for the better, hopefully.

Paul Bev. 8.8.21

156 *Changing our minds X – Genesis 1–3, a new (old?) reading*

[A year on, and I still think Walton's ideas are really helpful, but I'm less sure of the ideas I drew from them.]

(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 is 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. In this, I was really helped by John Walton's *Lost World of Genesis One*.^[130–133] He sees creation not as 'manufacturing a thing' – the universe – but rather as 'creating a place'. So God creates humans in order to have a relationship with us, and in Genesis 1 God *enters* that place.

And it was 'good' – it says this five times, and then says 'very good'. So I read 'good' as good for 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 use the term 'sin' simply because we too easily think of it as 'doing naughty things', rather I'll say that 'untrust' entered. If you don't trust someone, it spoils your relationship – as we all know to our cost.

'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 you.' 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 in Jesus also 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 since very early days.^[16] But **how** is never mentioned in the creeds.⁵

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

⁵ I now think this argument is a little iffy, because the creeds were set up to deal with the areas of contention, and not as a complete summary of all Christians needed to know – more here for our homework, I think.

157 Changing our minds XI – The good news

As I explained in my 2017 article,^[0] 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,^[1] 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 actual detail, especially some of the apparently 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 good⁶

God gives humans free will, 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?

⁶ Yes, I realise some of you will baulk at this clause. You believe the doctrine of 'original sin'. We can discuss it later, but I think that's one of the ways the church has misled us over the centuries.

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.

But sin really is a major 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

Bibliography

(That's a bit of a grandious title for 'a few books I found significantly helpful'.)

In reverse order of when I read them:

The King Jesus Gospel, *The Original Good News Revisited*, Scot McKnight

The Lost World of Genesis One, *Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*, John Walton

Cross Vision, *How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence*, Gregory Boyd

The Story of King Jesus (the gospel for 4–8-year-olds), Ben Irwin

A More Christ-like God, *A more beautiful gospel*, Bradley Jersak

Disarming Scripture, *Why we all need to learn to read the Bible like Jesus did*, Derek Flood

Healing the Gospel, *A radical vision for grace, justice, and the cross*, Derek Flood

The Divine Dance, *The Trinity and your transformation*, Richard Rohr

And finally a classic that I've read four or five times over the years:

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

To explain about **The Story of King Jesus**; it's an excellent 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 prophets, and eventually Jesus, and each time we decline God's help. A brilliant book! Ben Irwin, (2015)

And do watch this really helpful video, illustrating this more beautiful gospel that we're discovering: Brad Jersak with 'the gospel in chairs':

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7FKhHScgUQ>

This one may be a bridge too far just yet...

Changing our mind David Gushee (2nd Edn 2015) on sexuality issues