

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 prophesies, words of knowledge and words of wisdom? Yes, there's good biblical precedent for that. What about through poetry? Christian-based 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.