

Core Theology 3

The Bible

I am claiming that authentic Christianity is Trinitarian, Biblical, Sacramental and Missionary. (I am thinking of adding Prophetic.) The Prophetic has not usually been part of our traditional Christian experience because we have been centred on historic and confessional Christianity. We have been looking backwards not forwards. That is, the Church has been true to past resolutions of theological conflict. For theology to become cosmic and universal, the dynamic of the prophetic pushes us into the future rather than having us look at the past and locate ourselves in some centuries old theological dilemma. For prophecy to be real it implies that, in some sense, the future exists. History is becoming more apocalyptic. What happens today happens to the Global Village. The Internet binds us all together. In this situation the place and function of Israel becomes critical. These are future thoughts.

The Text of the Bible.

The Bible has come to us as a text of writing. This means that for over 3500 years for the OT and 2000 years for the NT, there have been texts in existence. These texts suffer variations in writing style and writing materials. In talking about the texts we assume that there were autographs, that is, the original written document. All original autographs have been lost, which means that we are presented with a series of copies of copies of copies ... until 1455 AD when the printing press was invented by Gutenberg. Textual Criticism is the study of how the various texts with their scribal traditions have come down to us. The first printed book ever published in the West by a press using movable type was a (Latin Vulgate) Bible (the Gutenberg Bible). After this we do not have scribal errors as such. What we do have today is a proliferation of translations. Different publishers are putting out their translations/ interpretations of the Bible. If a future archaeologist was to scarp over the remains of our culture which Bible variant would he accept?

The Old Testament (OT) can be seen as starting with Moses writing the Pentateuch c 1500 BC. Together with the poetic and prophetic books and the histories there developed three scribal traditions or sources of the text. These are the Masoretic, the Septuagint and the Samaritan. The Septuagint (LXX = 70) was the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek by (traditionally 72 scholars in 72 days) in Alexandria about 250 BC. OT references in the NT are quotes from the LXX. The Samaritans were the group of Jews that did not go into the Babylonian captivity and developed their own traditions. The Masoretic text was produced by schools of scholars (masorettes) in the Middle ages (1100 AD). It is the text of the Hebrew Bible used today. All Classical texts of Greece and Rome are no earlier than the Middle ages. However, with the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls (at Qumran) many Bible fragments were found, including a complete Isaiah scroll dated at 200 BC. This jump backwards of 1000 years in textual history is remarkable. What is even more remarkable is that there is virtually no difference in the Biblical texts from the two eras.

The New Testament (NT) commences around 50 AD with the early letters of Paul. The sequence appears to be (nobody is certain) the gospels, Acts, Paul's later epistles, the catholic epistles and Revelation as the last book written. There are 1000s of fragments of the NT that have been found. The earliest are fragments of papyrus from as early as 200 AD. The next are uncials (rounded capitals writing style) 400-500 AD. The next are

Miniscule texts 900-1300 AD. These are texts with lower-case letters. Most ancient texts are all in capitals and often continuous with no break between words. 835 AD is the earliest known Greek NT. No book has been studied, analysed and researched like the Bible.

Authorship.

Problems can start to arise when we attempt to analyse authorship. Just who wrote what? There was a tradition of authors using well known religious names for their own work, particularly for apocryphal books (such as the Book of Enoch, the Gospel of Thomas and the Acts of Peter). A theory developed called the Documentary Hypothesis, which claimed that Moses did not write the Pentateuch. It was claimed that after the Babylonian captivity when Judaism was being formed, that editors re-worked the traditions to create the Pentateuch for Judaistic and purely ideological purposes. The four traditions or sources used were JEDP (J = Yahwist, E = Elohist, D = Deuteronomist, P = Priestly). It is claimed that these sources can be detected in scripture by the different uses of the title for God (Yahweh, Elohim) and legal and priestly interests. Although these traditions seem plausible, the argument can then be made that Moses was really an invention of the editors and not an historic figure at all. The real suggestion is that the Biblical record is a concoction of an interest group pursuing its own ideological advantage. Spong argues that the Resurrection was a concoction of the disciples to keep the dream alive. These authors (in my opinion) are dis-assembling scripture in terms of their own pre-conceived ideas of where the ideas came from. It has the effect of making their ideas rule over scripture. If an idea is found among the Babylonians, then the idea must have come from them. Paul's ideas were really sourced from the Hellenistic culture around him. By this approach everybody is a product and prisoner of their culture and even the Bible is limited to its own cultural expression and temporal meaning. Personally, I resist this reduction of scripture to its cultural conditions. It is true that scripture is placed in a cultural setting. This is incarnational (God in the flesh). But scripture is not limited to its cultural setting. The Bible, by the very act of translation, transcends its culture and language of origin. No book has been translated like the Bible has. Many remote languages (including aboriginal) survive only because some missionary gave their working life to translating the Bible into the indigenous tongue. (Is it a principle that the Bible can be translated, in principle, into every human tongue? Yes. The Gospel is expressible in any human language. Notice that there are artificial, computer and animal languages or means of communication). I must not let people rob me of the power of scripture (Col 2:8). I want scripture to speak into my life.

The Integrity of Scripture.

I want to hold together the integrity and authority of scripture. I am not particularly concerned if the supposed authors of scripture actually wrote the text or not. Whether Matthew actually wrote the Gospel of Matthew does not really concern me. Personally, I have come to a place where I regard scripture and what it says very highly. I want the scripture to judge me. I want to hear what the scripture is saying to me even beyond my cultural setting. I believe that scripture can search me and give me revelation. I do not understand all scripture, but I have discovered that the scripture makes amazing and surprising sense. I have learnt to

trust the scriptures. They stand up to the scrutiny of life (from where I come from anyway).

The Plain Sense of Scripture.

The way I express this is as follows. I claim that scripture does have a plain sense. But the scripture, as any text (= writing on paper), needs interpretation. What does the plain sense mean? Sometimes the interpretation can violate the plain sense. The Bible plainly says that the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea on dry ground (Ex 14:29). Many see the Exodus as a moment of liberation for the Hebrews and the creation of a nation. Some claim that this is a myth created by the post-exilic editor (redactor) that is manufactured and read back into Jewish history. So the extent of their interpretation dissolves the plain sense that the children of Israel did cross, historically, the Red Sea on dry ground. Some claim that the Resurrection (John 21:14) means New Life and that its real significance is the quality of life that we can have as a Christian. Therefore they see no need for the supernatural (offensive?) significance of resurrection. Here their interpretation has over-written the plain sense and denied the historical event. The Christian faith is based on four historic events: the birth, dying, rising and ascending of Jesus Christ. To this we may add the two wider historic events of Creation and Judgement.

Is this Fundamentalism?

Fundamentalism is when someone claims that there is only one interpretation of a text and, of course, it is their interpretation. Fundamentalism is not what you believe but how you believe it. There is the fundamentalist Marxist, Freudian, Moslem, Christian, right-wing Thatcherite ... These people believe not only that there is only one interpretation of the text but there is only one text. If we call an interpretation a script (for life) then these people claim that life has only one script, their script. In the words of the title of a recent talk on terrorism 'I am right, You are dead'. As a Christian, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Light of the World. But I recognise that there are other people out there, believing other things, with whom I have to do battle to assert the claims of Jesus Christ. As Christians we are in the ideological marketplace. I believe, and I recognise, that other people believe other things also. What matters is how I believe scripture. I believe that it is true and that it is able to stand up to all the cuts and thrusts of reality. A lion is quite capable of protecting itself. The attacks made on scripture are usually attempts to cage the lion and rob the text of its supernatural power and judgement. People are changing what they are listening to, when they re-cast scripture in their own image. An example of the genuine, variable interpretations of scripture can be seen in Mark 14:22 when Jesus said 'This is my body'. What did He mean? It was, obviously, not His body as a human as He was still in it. The whole history of the church reflects the various ways of celebrating and interpreting what Jesus said as expressed in Holy Communion/Mass.

Scripture on Scripture.

Scripture has a very high doctrine of scripture.

1. Moses says that the words he was speaking were to be bound as a sign on their hand and as frontlets between their eyes (phylacteries). This is characteristic of Jews at prayer (Deut 6:8).

2. The Psalmist says that 'Your word is a light to my path and a Lamp to my feet' (Ps 119:105).
3. God says that His word shall not return to Him void but it shall accomplish what God pleases and prosper in the thing for which it was sent (Is 55:11).
4. Jesus says that Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35). This is the strongest teaching of all about scripture.
5. Paul says that Scripture preached the gospel to Abraham (Gal 3:8) and that the Scripture has confined all under sin (Gal 3:22).
6. To Timothy Paul claims that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16).

My dealings with Scripture.

1. I explore the literalness. I want the text to speak to me. I ask for confrontation and correction. I must not wrest the Scriptures to my own destruction (2 Pet 3:16). I must not crave my own control over Scripture.
2. If I want the Biblical experience I must use the Biblical language in the Biblical way. To lose the language is to lose the imagery, structure and the persuasion.
3. There can be levels of interpretation. See, for instance, 1 Cor 10:1-13 and Ps 78:25 'Men ate angel's food' (manna).
4. I do not argue for inerrancy or infallibility of Scripture. Maybe the Scripture is inerrant but I cannot prove it. One counter-instance destroys the infallibility (without error) argument. I prefer the words 'reliable' and 'trustworthy'. Given a high doctrine of Scripture, I can trust myself to it.
5. I receive scripture as the Word of God to me. Scripture reveals the mind of Christ. Scripture says that Jesus is the Word of God (John 1:1). Jesus is the Living Word; Scripture is the Written Word. Christ in us, the hope of glory (Col 1:27) is the indwelling Word received by means of the written word.
6. Scripture reveals spirit principles and how they work. We can dabble in the supernatural and get hurt (Acts 19:11-19 sons of Sceva). There is supernatural evil (= the Biblical language of the demonic). We can learn how Moses (Elijah, Samson, David, Paul) handled spirit truth. There are spirit principles of praying, worshipping, fasting, healing all of which are graphically portrayed in Scripture.
7. When we read Scripture, the Scripture is reading us. The Word of God (living and written) is sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. There is no creature who is hidden from God's sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to Whom we must give account (Heb 4:12-13). I want Scripture to open me up to the saving gaze of God. No more nonsense, only spirit truth.
8. Spirit truth is the work of Holiness in me. That is, the work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus. My desire is to be a holy, dedicated work for God.
9. The Bible is a spirit discipline which is seed planted in my heart, which is able to save my soul (James 1:21). Receive, with joy and meekness, the implanted word.
10. Scripture is a container holding me in a certain conversation (lifestyle) and truncating and forming certain attitudes. Jacob limped after his wrestling with God (Gen 32:22-32). Becoming a Christian makes me the slave of Jesus Christ. I am held, contained, directed, defined, useful only for Another. I am not my own, I have been bought with a price (1 Cor 6:19, 7:23).