



MISSION

ISSUE 3 2015

CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture

This one's for
the Kingdom!



AT SEA OVER SCRIPTURE

Can we be more honest about the Bible?

TONY CAMPOLO

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LETTERS

WRITE TO MISSION CATALYST ABOUT PREVIOUS ARTICLES, TOPICS WE MIGHT COVER OR WHAT YOU THINK OF THE MAGAZINE.

CATALYST FOR DISCUSSION

We are going to start a *Catalyst* group in our church, in order to meet and discuss the articles you have in your magazine. I don't suppose you would consider a little discussion guide inside the magazine? Like a questions for discussion in this issue page? Just to make my life a little easier? This may be good for groups like ours to discuss...

Vicky Martin, Seaford

Great idea, but at this point we have no plans to create discussion resources – we'd hate to restrict debate by framing the questions for you. Plus, we just don't have the staff time right now to do the kind of job we'd like to with this.

COMMUNION OF THE LETTERS

I've spent my Sunday afternoon today with a cup of tea and reading through the latest *Catalyst* magazine and would just like to say thank you to all of the writers and team involved in producing such a thought-provoking issue.

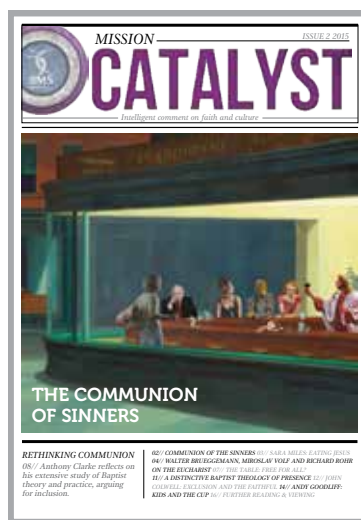
Having been brought up in a church where children were ushered out at the end of service, I could really relate to some of the ideas discussed and was struck by how you have sensitively dealt with what is a divisive issue that has caused much heartache in our churches. It was encouraging to read of the differing journeys people are on with this issue and the exhortations to re-think our attitude towards Communion and to gain a deeper understanding were particularly helpful and inspiring.

Thank you for highlighting this issue and may it bear fruit in our churches!

Lorna Brown

Thanks for your article about Communion. I have had reservations with the interpretation of 1 Cor 11 which seems to make Communion a fearful thing rather than a celebration of gratitude. I was particularly encouraged by your comment that Jesus was inclusive at meal times. He died for all!

Paul Rhodes, Swindon



Trying to break free from Baptist tradition, you still discuss a traditional Baptist question: "Who should partake?" A different approach: whatever meals you take as models in the gospels, what makes the Lord's Meal the Lord's is the presence of the Lord. So, where is he today?

In the gospels, there is a distinction between the crowd, who follow Jesus around, and the disciples, who have

been invited by Jesus to identify with him. For Paul, those who are identified with Jesus as his body are those who share in the loaf in remembrance of him. Unless there is such an invitation to identify with Jesus, can Jesus be present?

An alternative practice: in the Eastern Orthodox liturgy, only 'the faithful' can share in the consecrated bread and wine, but the remaining, unconsecrated, bread is shared afterwards with anyone who wants it, believer or not. Should we not see Communion as a meal for disciples, in which they identify anew with Christ who gave himself for them? But they could then take the bread and juice out into the world, to be Christ to those who receive it from them?

Bob Allaway, Wood Green

PS: I look forward to and enjoy reading *Mission Catalyst*. Great food for thought!



All letters to Mission Catalyst at PO Box 49, 129 Broadway, Didcot, OX11 8XA and emails to catalyst@bmsworldmission.org will be considered for publication and may be edited for length and style if selected. Many letters are invited. Not all are chosen.

BEYOND LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE



CAN WE MOVE BEYOND LABELS AND COMFORTING PROOF TEXTS TO DISCOVER GOD'S TRUTH?

Go back 30 or 40 years and Scripture battles were often a liberal versus conservative affair. Today, old-style liberal theology, typically with a low view of the authority of Scripture, is nowhere as visible as it once was.

Today's spectrum, certainly within the broadly evangelical world that Baptists inhabit, might be described as a creative tension between two perspectives that both hold to a high view of Scripture.

Acknowledging the weakness of labels, let me term one perspective a traditionalist one, amongst whom some, but not all, would speak of the inerrancy of Scripture. This high view will tend to want Scripture to be read plainly, with an intense distrust for the intellectual gymnastics sometimes applied to bring a fresh perspective to certain passages.

This position typically holds to a high view of the transcendence of Jesus, sometimes to the danger point where humankind can appear more compassionate than Jesus. Might we detect here a greater emphasis on a salvation-centred 'kingdom of heaven'?

Let's call the other side of the spectrum non-traditionalist, also holding to a high view of Scripture. Here we find Jesus co-opted as 'the

hermeneutic of the word', whereby some traditional interpretations are challenged by running any resultant theology through the lens of the life and ministry of Jesus and asking whether they are consistent.

The humanity of Jesus is emphasised here – sometimes to the danger point of Jesus being reduced to just a kinder version of us. Might we detect here a greater emphasis on a justice-centred 'kingdom of God' here on earth?

This two-fold categorisation is crude and most people are neither one nor the other but will embrace aspects of both. Besides, driving a divide between the Word of Scripture and Jesus the Logos is inherently unwise.

Moreover, Jesus himself challenges any simple co-optation. We read in Matthew 5: 18: "until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter... will... disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished." That's a very high view of a traditionalist take on Scripture. But then in Matthew 9: 13, quoting Hosea, he says: "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Without mercy or love, we have nothing.

Now here's the point. Truth is

complex, so all sides need to be more honest about their position. Are we all guilty of cherry-picking our texts – this verse here, that story there – so that jumping around we can develop a particular theological framework – but, in doing so, neatly step over areas that don't fit with our assumed position?

In this *Catalyst* we have asked various writers to wrestle with this tension. Like all of us, they write from within a particular set of theological convictions, and not necessarily those sketched above. But my request of each is to try and bridge to the other, to recognise the tension and be as honest as possible.

There is an important reason for doing this of course. Theology shapes ethics, or faith shapes morality. And as life around us changes, new ethical and moral challenges demand a response.

This interaction is healthy – never to be dismissed as merely 'the world shaping the word'. Rather it is respecting the fact that over millennia the Church has gone on discovering new depths to Scripture by permitting just such a conversation to happen and, as a result, has been an effective and relevant participant in the mission of God. How can we best encourage that conversation today?

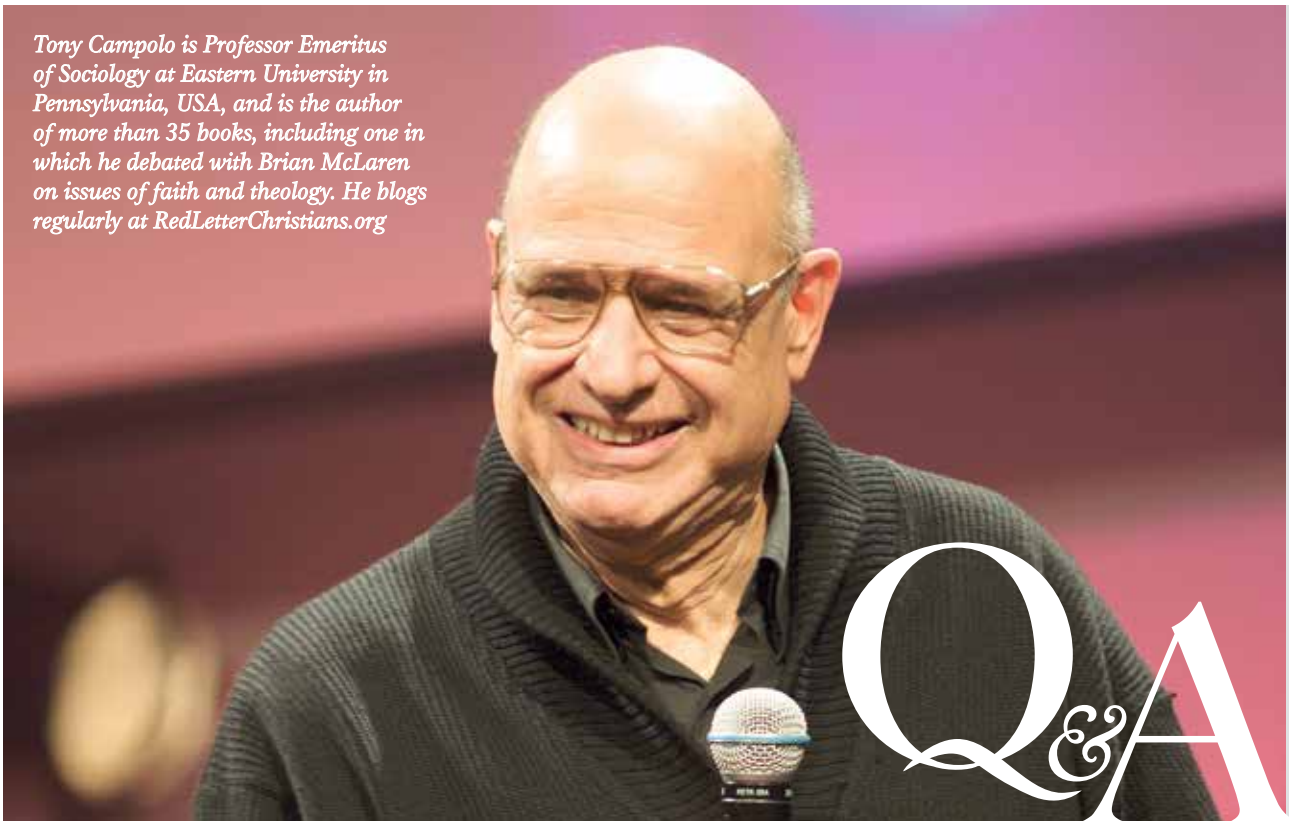
David Kerrigan
General Director

Now is the time to take a stand

- + Sign the **Dignity Church Charter** as a fellowship
- + Become a **24:7 Justice Partner** as an individual at bmsworldmission.org/justicepartners
- + Download the full range of pastoral resources at bmsworldmission.org/dignity



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Q&A

TONY CAMPOLO

THE WELL-KNOWN BAPTIST LEADER APPLIES HIS 80 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE TO LIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES, ARROGANCE AND HUMILITY, RICHARD ROHR AND JOHN PIPER.

Liberal and conservative, progressive and traditional – both sides tend to have their proof texts to which they appeal. Is there something either ‘side’ could learn from the other in terms of how they approach Scripture?

I think there is a tendency to have deaf ears to the other side. But it is

my opposition that always sees the weaknesses in my own arguments. I don’t see them very clearly. Thus, I think we can learn from each other as we listen to each other, even as we carry on a fairly intense dialogue.

I think if we do not come in a spirit of humility, if we do not come to each

other across those lines, with that kind of attitude – ‘here is my position, I could be wrong’ – we end up really attacking each other and nothing is gained. Over the years, I look back at my interpretations of Scripture and I realise that the way one interprets a particular passage changes – thanks to education, hearing other

people's points of view and so on – and I think everyone's interpretation does. I think that if each side says 'I could be wrong' and 'over the years I have seen my own interpretations of Scripture change', you are going to have a reasonable discussion and not preach at each other. But both sides must entertain that possibility.

So I always have to be open to the fact that the other side will help me to see Scripture in a new way.

You worked with Brian McLaren on *Adventures in Missing the Point* [a book in which Campolo and McLaren debated key issues from liberal and conservative positions]. Would the Church as a whole benefit from more open and honest disagreements and debates like that?

Of course the Church would benefit. That is almost a truism. But let me say that Brian McLaren and I are friends, and when the discussion took place, on the basis of friendship, I did not feel, and he did not feel, threatened as we posed points in opposition to each other's. When we threaten each other, and when we are afraid of each other, we run into painful conflict. Perfect love casts out fear.

When two brothers in Christ care about each other, and share a kind of Christian love for each other, fear of the other person disappears. What you know and I know is that, in the discussions that take place within the Church, too often the parties are afraid of each other and afraid that they won't win the argument – that is what makes those discussions destructive. People who care about each other, who are not threatened by each other – they can carry on discussions and the whole process can become really a blessing to both parties.

There is a trend on both the Left and Right, liberal and conservative sides, to infer in rhetoric or even to state outright that people are not 'real Christians' if they disagree on certain points that have historically never been central to our faith. How do we move to a point where we can disagree wholeheartedly and still acknowledge each other's legitimate faith in Christ?

I think whenever there is a conversation between people who call themselves Christians taking place, there has to be a recognition that it is God who does the judging. I do not have the right to say to any person, 'you are not a Christian'. Even those who question some very basic doctrines. I think the

apostle Paul says it well: "This one thing I know: Christ and his crucifixion and his Resurrection." That is the bottom line for me. I think if someone says, "I believe that Jesus is the incarnation of God, that his death on the cross takes care of my sin, and that his Resurrection is affirmed and that he is in the world today and he is a presence now" – these are the things that

in part. I think that sense of absolutism, you know: *'my way is Yahweh*, if you don't agree with me then you are not in accord with God', is in fact to make the self a god. We used to talk about the doctrine of infallibility that the Pope had. I think so often that evangelical Christians believe that they're Popes who are infallible. People on both sides do that.

“EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS OFTEN BELIEVE THAT THEY'RE POPES WHO ARE INFALLIBLE”

cannot be compromised. Everything else is up for discussion, every issue is up for discussion. I think that Pope John XXIII said it well: "On secondary issues, we're going to have liberty. On primary issues, it is a different thing. But in all things, there must be love."

Does our faith today shape our morality, or is our contemporary culture's morality shaping our faith?

That is the kind of dichotomy that I think encourages conflict and is not productive. The reality is that theology is always carried on in the context of interaction with the dominant culture in which you are living and the questions that arise in that society. That is why we have theologians. Every generation has to recast its beliefs in terms of the situations and questions that have arisen in their own generation.

So often we have theologies that are answering questions that were raised 500 years ago and we are not dealing with the questions that are arising in our contemporary situation. I believe that theology is always an answering discipline.

When I was a young kid, the dominant issue that had been raised by the culture, that the Church was called to answer, was the question of what do we do with people that are divorced or remarried. People were being thrown out of the church if they were divorced and remarried. I think the dominant question right now is what are we going to do about gay marriage? 50 years ago no one talked about that issue.

We have to remember that Scripture says we know in part and we prophesy

The growing popularity, particularly among young Christians, of the likes of John Piper on one side and Richard Rohr on the other, suggests that the 'centre' ground of Christianity might be being abandoned in favour of more extreme positions. Why do you think these views are so popular?

One of the nicest things about finding people like Piper and Rohr is that we can let these super thinkers, and I consider them both super thinkers, do the thinking for us. We tend to look for somebody who is a brilliant articulator and whose words resonate with our own feelings. And then whatever that person or leader has to say becomes absolute truth for us. We tend to stop evaluating what they are saying.

If some wonderful Christian, like Piper on the one side and Rohr on the other, says something that looks wonderful, we tend to say: "This is the truth." Piper has the truth. Or Rohr has the truth. No, no, no – they have part of the truth, not because I said so, but because the Bible says so.

We are lazy people and do not want to struggle with the issues ourselves. So we let some brilliant person struggle with the issues and then accept whatever she or he says. I think that both Rohr and Piper would be upset if people simply took what they had to say without question. I think these are genuine members of the body of Christ and would say: "This is what I believe but I am willing to be questioned, I don't want you to believe things simply because I say so." I think that is what both of them would say. And it goes for the left and the right as well.

Tony Campolo was talking to Chris Hall.

Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Temptation of Adam* (1551-52)



INSTEAD OF A HANDFUL OF TENUOUS PROOF TEXTS ABOUT SEX, PERHAPS WE SHOULD SEE SEX IN THE CONTEXT SCRIPTURE FIRST INTRODUCES IT: GENESIS 2.

The Church's approach to sexual ethics has not always been sensitive, and it has not always been intellectually honest. When we talk about sexual lifestyles and behaviours, the discussion generally reduces to one of a handful of well-worn arguments around same-sex practice, or sometimes divorce and sex before marriage.

These arguments are typically

propped up with proof texts, drawn from passages of the Bible convenient for their liberal or conservative proponents respectively, frequently with keen attention to their (unwritten) historical context but less awareness of the overall arc of Scripture. For same-sex relationships, verses in Leviticus 18 and 20, Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6 are presented, on the one hand; and between-the-lines inferences about the

relationship between David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi on the other.

We divide into our entrenched positions, often chosen before genuine engagement with the text – the ultimate exercise in confirmation bias. Out of a desire to move with the times and to be politically correct, we are also in danger of being driven by the culture – rather than speaking into the prevailing culture and holding it to account, like the Old

Testament prophets. Time and again we hear the sentiment that the Church must 'update its approach' to sex, because societal mores have changed and it is in danger of appearing woefully outdated – a compromise it would never occur to us to make in other areas such as poverty, finance or the environment.

When we do try to apply the Bible's teaching about sex to the world around us, it is often in this handful of key issues that our rapidly-changing culture has brought to our doorstep. What we do not tend to do is question the assumptions and approaches that lie behind them. In other words, we have a firm appreciation of the trees without realising that we are standing in a far deeper and more tangled wood.

Genesis 2

Our approach to sexual ethics is usually negatively-stated, presumably because it is easier to be against something than it is

“SEX EFFECTIVELY IS MARRIAGE”

to be for something, and because most of the proof texts on which we rely for our arguments follow the 'do not' form.

If we want a positively-stated template for human sexuality, the starting point must be Genesis 1 and 2. God creates humanity in his own image, and as 'male and female' (Genesis 1: 26-27). We might reasonably infer that this is a reflection of God's own nature – not, presumably, in the division of the sexes itself, but in the capacity for relationship and (pro) creativity that results.

The given reason for the humans' existence is to steward creation (Genesis 2: 16). It's also worth noting that the term 'suitable helper' for this task, used of the woman in Genesis 2: 18, does not imply a subordinate but, in Hebrew, a complementary and equal partner. In fact, the word 'helper' is frequently used of God elsewhere in the Bible.

In Genesis 2: 24 we see God's pre-Fall template for sex: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh." Whilst marriage isn't mentioned here, this verse is quoted not just once but three times in the New Testament with that backdrop:

“OUR CULTURE DISPLAYS THE CURIOUS AMBIVALENCE OF BOTH IDOLISING SEX AND CHEAPENING IT”

- Matthew 19: 1-9, by Jesus, in the context of easy divorce.
- 1 Corinthians 6: 12-20, by Paul, in the context of sex with prostitutes (and, by implication, any temporary sexual relationship).
- Ephesians 5: 25-33, by Paul, in the context of marriage, as a metaphor for Christ's relationship with the Church.

Genesis 2: 24, and the way it is taken up by Jesus and Paul, shows that the

ideal for sex is within permanent, faithful marriage. Moreover, sex effectively *is* marriage: Exodus 22: 16-17 shows that sex is considered to bring about marriage, unless there are extreme circumstances. In fact, the one flesh template is consistent with all of the Bible's broader teachings about sex.

Thus, in the Bible, sex is far more than a purely personal relationship between two people, for their individual enjoyment. It is one that is acknowledged to impact third parties, not least because it images our relationship with God. Its overarching context is not one of personal fulfilment, as our culture implies, or even one of procreation – though that comes into it. It is one of stewarding creation – and, after the Fall, redeeming it.

Intimacy and identity

However, the question of how we approach the Bible's teachings on sexual ethics obscures an issue that is larger and more important. It's about the role that sex plays in our culture – not just as an aspect of stable, faithful marriage, at one end of the spectrum, or as a recreational activity at the other, but as a fundamental matter of intimacy and identity.

In our consumer-driven culture, sex is used to sell just about everything from coffee and cars to furniture and footwear. Small wonder, then, that sexual relationship itself has become a consumer commodity: something there to serve us, to be tailored to our needs, and to be discarded and replaced when it fails to meet that purpose. And, as the most successful brands tell us, sex is about more than just a good experience. It's about a lifestyle – an identity.

Sex has become a kind of shorthand for intimacy. TV, film and media tend to present it as the only way you can truly know another person, to be close to them and find meaning and belonging. In the course of this shift in branding, it has also become ubiquitous. Our culture displays the curious ambivalence of both idolising sex as the highest form of relationship and cheapening it through overuse and overfamiliarity.

The challenge to the Church is to see through this exercise in marketing and present a vision of community that recognises that intimacy is possible and desirable in all kinds of relationship, sexual or otherwise. We should not be holding up marriage as the ideal relationship for everyone (whilst nevertheless recognising its importance, naturally). Our culture idolises sex; the Church must not make the same mistake with marriage.

Our identity is, first and foremost, in Christ, but we live in community with each other and a strong and diverse network of friendships and relationships is vital to our wellbeing. In a world that is more and more fragmented, in which intimacy and belonging are, paradoxically, scarcer than ever, such a vision of healthy community holds a great attraction to those outside the Church.

HIGHERARCHY

BEYOND AUTHORITARIANISM AND FEAR OF AUTHORITY

FEAR OF AUTHORITY AND ITS OVEREMPHASIS ARE BOTH HARD TO JUSTIFY FROM THE BIBLE

There are twin dangers for Christians living in the western world at the moment when it comes to the intriguing question of authority. The first is the kind of leadership that reacts to the flattened structures and anti-authoritarian culture we live in by reasserting the power of the leader. The second is a response to leadership that acquiesces to the anti-authoritarian culture with an individualism that rejects any kind of authority in church leadership.

Christian authoritarianism is entirely understandable in our current cultural context. On a daily basis, thanks to the near omnipresence of marketing messages, our views on what we need to buy next are being shaped not so much by the steady dripping of a tap that can wear down stone, but rather a burst water main of media that knocks us off our feet and into a constant stream of the marketed lifestyle. To live against this tide of targeted messaging is difficult, so most of us unwittingly go with the flow. Leaders that see the effect of this on Christian discipleship respond as to an emergency, seeking to stop the tide by reasserting the authority of Scripture and church discipline, and so lead in an authoritarian manner. Some Christians crave this kind of

leadership as a means of escaping from the undertow of consumer culture. In the sea of information they sometimes feel they are drowning in, the authoritative voice can appear very attractive.

There is definitely a place for decisive leadership, but that place is most often a crisis. The easiest way to understand this is to imagine a military

crisis where orders are received without question. And perhaps there is a direct link between those that offer alarmist descriptions of our times and those that are offering decisive leadership. It is in the best interests of the authoritarian leader to make everyone think we are in the middle of a crisis, because this allows their leadership style to kick in. Some say Churchill was a great wartime leader but not so brilliant in peacetime. The leadership needed in a crisis is very different from the leadership needed in

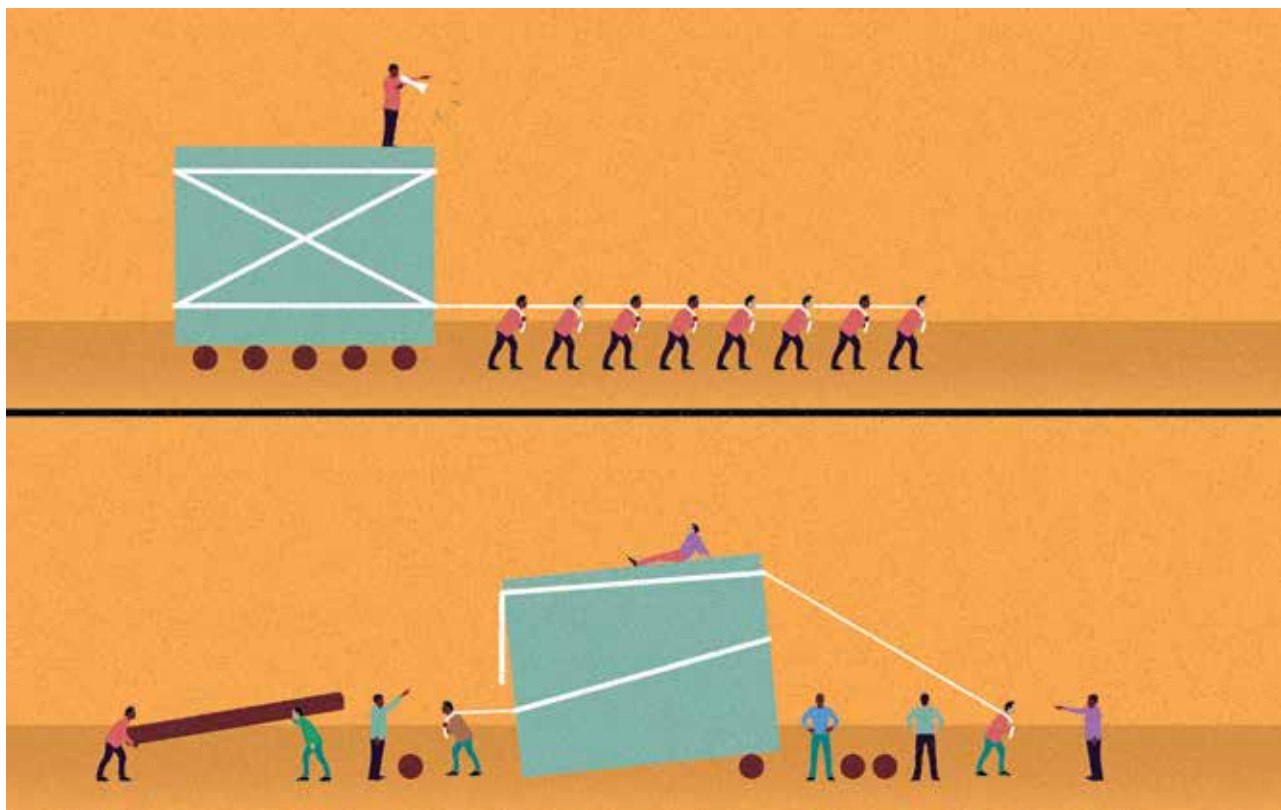
day-to-day life.

The problem with authoritarian leadership in the Church is that it becomes the norm, leaving little room for the agency of those being led. It infantilises congregations, assuming people are too immature, imbecilic or ill-informed to make decisions for themselves. At its worst extreme is what was known as the 'heavy shepherding' movement, where individuals were asked to suppress their decision making on everything from their finances to their fiancés. The leader offered a cult-like dictatorial form of leadership that contained the toxic cocktail of both an unhealthy lack of accountability and a lack of boundaries. Sadly this has often played into the leader's baser appetites and sexual

*“ AUTHORITARIAN LEADERSHIP
INFANTALISES CONGREGATIONS ”*

abuse and financial impropriety were the all-too-common and tragic outworkings of this kind of leadership. David Koresh and Jim Jones are names burned into the cultural memory – men who demonstrated the worst extremes of authoritarian leadership.

But you don't have to go to the world of the death cult to see the traits of this style of leadership in action. Within evangelicalism, the recent downfall of Mark Driscoll's fast growing church movement seems to be directly connected



with his authoritarian leadership style and his refusal to hear the counsel of critical friends.

Other groups act in paternalistic ways, seeking to protect their flocks from the harmful influences of authors or speakers that don't tow the specifics of their movement, whether in belief about the role of the Spirit, the age of the earth, the place of social justice or the ministry of women. Rather than help expose their flock to a range of views, they instead enforce a censoring role in the reading and listening habits of their flock. This approach actually leaves a congregation not stronger but weaker. It stops the average congregant from growing in wisdom and discernment as members are encouraged to outsource their thinking to their leaders.

There is also a kind of Christian that reacts to the abuse of power modelled not just by heavy shepherding cults (or the emerging ISIS caliphate, or North Korean dictators) by rejecting the influence of leaders in their lives.

In light of the corrupting power of power, these Christians resist any kind of authority. Baptists, for example, with no Pope or Bishops, often bristle at the idea of anyone making a decision without due process and consultation. Again, this is perfectly understandable in our current cultural context. We live in an

“ IF WE ARE NOT CAREFUL, WHEN WE REJECT LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH, WE REJECT GOD HIMSELF ”

individualised world where the common bonds that tie us together are being corroded by the acids of modernity. In our consumer society, we the consumer are sovereign and dislike the idea of knowingly submitting to another power.

The trouble with rejecting authoritative leadership is that God rightfully claims all authority on heaven and earth. One day every knee will bow, and every tongue confess the authoritative leadership of Jesus when we confess him as Lord. God is working to bring everything under the feet of Jesus in submission to his authority. Jesus has delegated authority to leaders in the Church. The Good Shepherd has appointed under-shepherds (1 Peter 5). If we are not careful, when we reject leadership in the Church, we reject God himself. The anarchic, unaccountable Christian individual is not a normal Christian according to the Bible.

The Bible affirms both the equality of all believers *and* the calling of leaders. Scripture recognises individual

responsibility and the fact that God delegates authority to leaders. The Word of God recognises that leaders are called to lead by serving and serve by leading. As with so many elements of Scripture's teaching, we are called to hold different aspects of doctrine in tension. There is no place for the kind of authoritarian leadership that uses power in an oppressive manner – Jesus expressly forbids it. But there is also no place for the unaccountable lone Christians who will not recognise the gift of servant leaders that God has given his people.

Jesus makes a clear distinction between his own approach to leadership as a servant leader and the prevailing culture of his day (Mark 10: 42-45). As we seek to live out the gospel in western culture as we have opportunity, we must lead in a way that demonstrates the counter-cultural servant leadership of Jesus, but we must also be willing to accept the gift of leaders to the Church and, when appropriate, submit to their leadership too.

Dr Anna Robbins

Associate Professor of Theology, Culture and Ethics at Acadia Divinity College, Canada.

HOLY HOW?

STANDING OUT FROM CULTURE FOR THE RIGHT REASONS

HOW WE ARE CALLED TO BE DIFFERENT AND HOLY CAN BE SEEN IN VERY DIFFERENT WAYS BY DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE CHURCH.

I stood and looked around at thousands of people in worship, eyes closed, hands in the air. “God, you are different,” sang out the voices in unison. We had just received a rousing message from the speaker that focused on the holiness of God, where ‘holiness’ was defined simply as: ‘different’. We were encouraged to be different – that is, compassionate advocates of God’s love, wherever love is to be found. Then we sang to God and told him he was different. I found it difficult to join in.

Holiness does mean ‘different,’ but different in what way? Holiness embraces within its meaning a moral quality that highlights not simply some nebulous ‘difference’ as culturally defined. Rather, it entails understanding God’s difference from us, and the rest of his creation, as a moral purity that stands in contrast to our own rebellion against his invitation to “be holy, as I am holy”. It is a personal and a social call to obedience that embraces the whole of life.

We are quick to equate what we love with what God loves, and what we hate with what he hates. We project our agendas onto him, and morph God into human values writ large. In contrast, we read in the Bible of a God whose thoughts are not our thoughts, and whose ways are not our ways. This reminder of God’s transcendence protects us from the sin of pride, where we are tempted to think that our political programme, whatever it is, has the stamp of God’s approval all over it. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out that God’s ‘difference’ means that, despite our best efforts, we will never get it quite right. There is no place for self-congratulation or self-assurance. We can only approach God

with a great humility as to whether we’ve grasped his agenda for the Church at all.

The social gospel of the early 1900s recognised God’s activity in the world in social movements of all kinds; even atheistic labour ones. Rightly grasping afresh God’s character as loving, the movement went on to emphasise love and justice largely to the exclusion of God’s

“ WHEN WE THINK WE CREATE TRUTH, WE NO LONGER HAVE A FAITH THAT IS WORTH CONVERSION, LET ALONE MARTYRDOM ”

righteousness. Or, more correctly, it often equated God’s righteousness with human love and justice, wherever they were to be found. God was at work in the world. *Join the process of his Spirit unfolding his wings in the world*, came the beckoning call.

Not everyone was wooed by the invitation. At least one Christian recognised that it took something more to keep a social movement going. Congregationalist PT Forsyth warned of what happens when we replace process (going with the flow) for effort (going against the flow). “We are borne along on a tide against which we cannot swim,” he warned. When we think we create truth, we no longer have a faith that is worth conversion, let alone martyrdom.

Being different means swimming against the flow. For many Christians in the world today, taking a stand isn’t about this ethical practice or that. It is about claiming

the very name of Christ. Martyrs know the heart of the call to be ‘different’ in ways we cannot grasp in a confused consumer culture.

But, then, part of me did long to join in with that song.

Unlike many Christians of a generation or two ago, we have come to understand that God is immanent as well as transcendent. He is over all, and in all, and through all. God is present in his world and in culture, and he speaks to it and through it. Where once God was hidden in mystery, to us the mystery has been revealed in Christ. Others worship what they don’t know; Christians claim to worship what they know. After all, Jesus is a friend who is closer than a brother.

Sometimes God beckons the Church

to awaken from her slumber, and catch up with what he is already doing in the world. It has taken a long time for the wider Church to learn to stand with marginalised people at home and abroad. And we still struggle to do so in ways that are not arrogant or paternalistic. For example, indigenous peoples around the world have too often been forced to suffer *from* the Church, rather than choosing to suffer *for* her.

The Bible portrays God’s holiness as a gift and a call. It is imputed and enacted; discovered and embodied. The paradox that God is near and far, mystery and revelation, requires a humility that soberly considers how we respond to God’s gift and call to holiness.

In the end, I didn’t join in the song. As the notes rose to a crescendo in my ears, I didn’t know whether I was right or wrong. But I like to be different.



BIBLICAL VIOLENCE

and what it teaches us

*AN EXAMINATION OF VIOLENCE IN
SCRIPTURE MAY HELP US TO REFINE OUR
ATTITUDES TO (AND UNDERSTANDING OF)
BIBLICAL TEXTS.*

How are we to view the scriptures properly? In both Old and New Testaments we see clues as to how God views them. God's people are told to "obey all the law Moses gave to you" (Joshua 1: 7) and the psalmist says the word of the Lord "is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119: 105).

In the New Testament, the scriptures are described as having a clear focus on Jesus. Talking to the Jewish leaders Jesus says: "These are the very scriptures that testify about me..." (John 5: 39).

And Paul writing to Timothy affirms the Christocentric nature of Scripture, "which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3: 16).

Passages such as these bring home to us that Scripture is about faith and ethics. It matters who you believe in and how you live. But do we always use Scripture correctly in pursuing these things?

Let me address the issue of violence in the Bible as a way of illustrating the challenge of how we use Scripture.

Over the last two years our TV screens have brought us horrific stills of men in orange jump suits, kneeling on the ground, about to be beheaded. As it happens,

over the same timescale I've had many opportunities to read bedtime Bible stories to my grandchildren and I have mastered the art of skipping over certain Old Testament passages in their Bible picture book, where the violence described is equally repulsive. I have longed to get to the New Testament.

But why is that? Have we a different God in Old and New Testaments? Has God changed character?

Well, lets get the easier-to-manage stuff out of the way first. Much of the violence recorded in the Old Testament may be a description of what happened, but there is no sense that God is approving of it. Some of the worst incidents, for example in Judges 19-21, are said to occur because "there was no King in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21: 25).

That doesn't avoid all the problems by any means. We also have to reckon with a lack of Godly censure. Why is it that Lot in Genesis 19: 8 can offer his two daughters to the men of Sodom to "do what you like with them", but in 2 Peter 2: 7-8 he is called righteous?

And the greater problems come in passages that seem to carry the direct approval of God. So, God is merciful to Lot and his family (Genesis 19: 16) but Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed in their entirety: "the Lord rained down burning sulphur... destroying all those living in the



Guillaume Courtois, *David and Goliath* (1628-1679)

cities" (vv24, 25). Tell me, were the three-year-olds who skipped and giggled as they played in the fields equally guilty?

As the Israelites were about to enter the land of Canaan where Canaanites were to be utterly destroyed, we read: "do not leave alive anything that breathes... – as the Lord your God has commanded you" (Deuteronomy 20: 16, 17).

And in 1 Samuel 15: 3 we read: "this is what the Lord Almighty says..." and what follows are orders to kill "men and women, children and infants."

How different this appears from the Jesus who taught us to turn the other cheek and love our enemies, who welcomed little children, gave dignity to women, rebuked Peter for a violent act, and stood silently before his torturers and surrendered to death. Please don't let anyone tell me there isn't a marked discontinuity here.

Like God's people in the past, we wrestle with how to understand God in relation to history. There was repulsion after the April 2015 earthquake in Nepal when a fundamentalist pastor said this was



a judgment on the people of that country for their many gods. But such views were common in the medieval world. Magnus II, a 14th century king of Sweden, at the height of the plague said: “God for the sins of men has struck this great punishment.”

Neither of them were right (in my humble opinion), but this was the worldview of the Bible too, and so, as nation battled nation, they inevitably co-opted God onto their side. Incidentally, some western leaders have voiced much the same ideas as they have gone to war in recent years.

In affirming Israel as God’s elect, maybe we have to recognise that Israel saw God, wrongly, as validating their every action. In much the same way, we are children of God “by grace... through faith”, but we also sin, make grievous errors and commit acts of evil.

Whilst I have absolute faith in God’s personal encounter with Moses on Sinai, and a host of other theophanies in Scripture, many will want to ask the question of 1 Samuel 15: was it truly what the Lord wanted, to kill “men and women,

**“DON’T TELL
ME THERE ISN’T
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HERE”**

children and infants”? To some, this will sound like standing in judgment over Scripture – but actually it’s the opposite. If we want Scripture to be what it is, the God-breathed but human narrative of God’s salvation history, inexorably pointing us to Christ who told us to love our enemies, then knowing how to use and not abuse Scripture is vital to its understanding.

Scripture is God-breathed, but it is also a product of human endeavour. As such, it is a fragile thing, capable of bearing the infinitely good news of God’s saving grace

through Jesus Christ, but embodying also the limited, time-bound understanding of its human authors.

If we do justice to our theology of Scripture, as both God-breathed and the product of human agency, we must allow that the humanity of the authors influenced the text. Human agency will always detract from the perfection of who God is and what God intends.

John was very clear about the purpose of Scripture: “these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20: 31).

In addition, Paul writing to Timothy, quoted above, confirms what we know from the earliest pages of Scripture, that God’s word reminds us of the ethical implications of knowing God as our creator.

But if, in this example of the portrayal of violence, we are seeing a developing ethical trajectory, culminating in Jesus the non-violent peacemaker, we will need to consider whether such a trajectory is applicable in other areas too.

USE OR MISUSE OF THE BIBLE BY JESUS?

BEFORE WE ACCUSE OUR PROGRESSIVE OR TRADITIONAL BRETHREN OF MISUSING THE BIBLE, WE SHOULD CONSIDER WHETHER JESUS DID THE SAME THINGS THEY DO.

I cringe when I hear preachers who misuse the Bible. They tell homely stories with vague Bible themes from which they grab a tangential point and develop it with out-of-context verses. Or they search for a paraphrase that fits their message because more accurate translations don't have the emphasis they want. And they weave everything into a structure that is so predictable you can hear the conclusion coming like a noisy train.

Sermon class at my Baptist college in Cardiff was led by the super-intelligent and laconic Neville Clarke. After you'd preached for ten minutes he would put his head back and listen with his eyes closed, and soon all the keen-eared students could hear him gently

snore. When you finished, the sudden silence would waken him. Then, amazingly, he would summarise your sermon – usually accurately – before telling you what you *should* have said. He was able to do this because he'd heard it all before, too often. He once explained that most of us made a classic mistake: we announced our text and theme and how we'd approach it, so that (as he said) “the only mystery remaining is how long you will take”.

Since then, I suspect that I've become a scholarly snob. I'm disturbed to discover that the gospels use Scripture in the same undisciplined and un scholarly way that my unfavourite preachers do.

Jesus told homely stories (parables) with vague links to Bible truths (such as the fatherhood of God) before grabbing a tangential application from them. He also quoted verses out of context, used inaccurate paraphrases, and preached with

predictable styles. These practices might get him an “A” for enthusiasm but an overall “C” in sermon class.

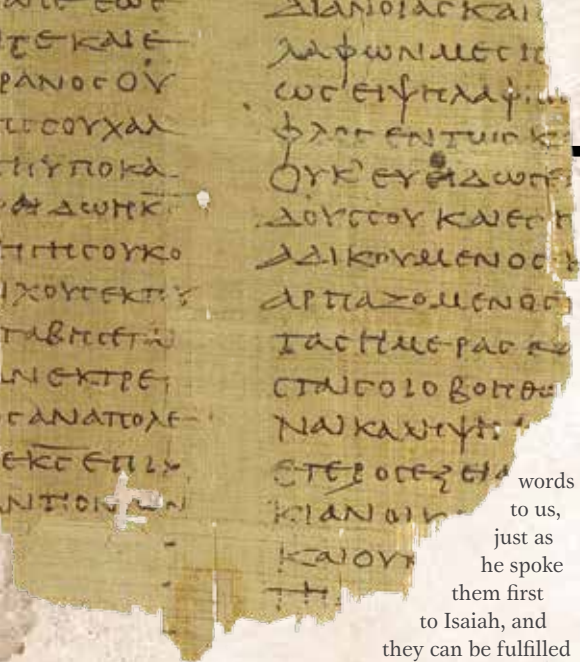
For example, when his disciples question Jesus' use of parables, he quotes what God told Isaiah when commissioning him. God warned that although the people would see and hear him, they wouldn't understand or accept what he said (Isaiah 6: 9-10). Jesus doesn't merely say that Isaiah's situation is similar. He claims that this message to Isaiah was “fulfilled”

in Jesus' day (Matthew 13: 14). The scholar inside me cries: *But the original context specifically says God was talking about the preaching of Isaiah himself – it wasn't a prophecy for later generations!*

Of course, Jesus is special – the whole Bible can be said to be about him. But I think he is demonstrating something more general: that the Holy Spirit can use and re-use Scripture as he likes. He can speak the same

“ THE HOLY SPIRIT CAN USE AND RE-USE SCRIPTURE AS HE LIKES ”

Jesus is special – the whole Bible can be said to be about him. But I think he is demonstrating something more general: that the Holy Spirit can use and re-use Scripture as he likes. He can speak the same



words
to us,
just as
he spoke
them first
to Isaiah, and
they can be fulfilled
again.

Jesus also used paraphrases that were very loose translations. That quote from Isaiah 6: 10, for example, ends with “lest they turn and are healed”; but Jesus finished it with “lest they turn and are forgiven” (Mark 4: 12). This paraphrase comes from the Targum – an Aramaic version which was widely used in synagogues in Jesus’ day, because the common people understood it better than the Hebrew Bible.

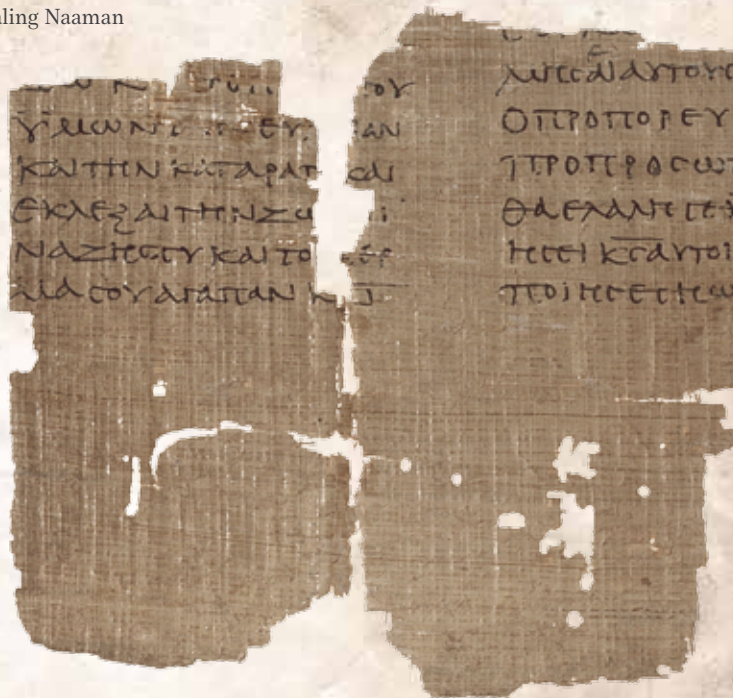
Actually, the “healing” of eyes and ears in Isaiah probably does imply “forgiveness”, because Isaiah’s mouth had just been similarly touched by God, and this was described as cleansing from sinfulness. But this linkage is a complex point to get across, so one could say that Jesus’ use of the Targum paraphrase was a helpful shortcut to explain Isaiah’s message in context.

Jesus also used predictable sermon forms. I’ve read enough early Jewish sermons to find them as boring and predictable as modern ones. They almost always start with a text which becomes a springboard into various other stories in the Bible before coming back to the final point in the original text. The links from the text to other stories can be very tenuous – perhaps just a theme or even a single word. We find Jesus using this common method in his very first sermon in Luke 4, when his home synagogue invited him to preach. His text was from Isaiah, and he used individual words in the text to link this to the miracle stories of Elijah and Elisha.

Actually, although this sermon structure was very common, his implementation of it was quite impressive. Normally preachers can only find links to a disparate set of stories, but Jesus managed to link the text to four related Elijah and Elisha miracles. Luke

records the first two: healing Naaman and feeding the widow (from 1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 5), both of whom were Gentiles. The next two chapters in 2 Kings contain the other two stories that Jesus was clearly planning to use: “opening the eyes” of the captive Syrians (6: 20), and the “good news” told by poor lepers (7: 9).

Jesus’ sermon may have gone better if he’d used a less obvious structure. His congregation were able to anticipate the barb that Jesus was preparing to prod them with. So they decided to run him out of town before



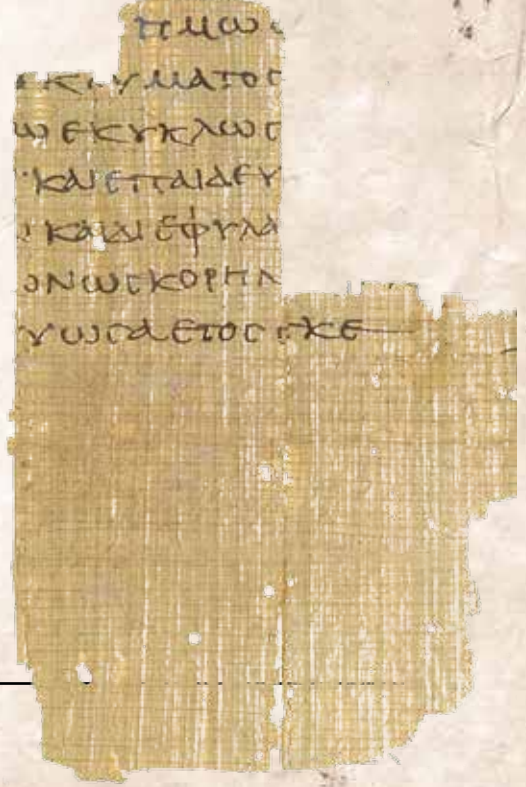
“ THE WORST MISTAKE WE CAN MAKE IS TO NEGLECT SCRIPTURE OUT OF FEAR OF MISUSING IT ”

he finished the sermon. The xenophobia that Jesus preached against in the first two stories was a general tendency in Galilee, but his final criticism was going to be much more personal. The fourth story concerned God’s punishment on someone who expressed scepticism about Elisha’s prophecy. The congregation recognised themselves, because they were being openly and audibly sceptical about Jesus. In that story, the man died from trampling by the crowd (2 Kings 7: 17-20) so Jesus’ escape is particularly poignant. They couldn’t push him off the cliff or trample him: he simply walks away, through the crowd (Luke 4: 29-30).

These examples make me reticent to criticise anyone’s so-called misuse of Scripture. Mistakes are certainly possible, and we all make them. But the worst mistake we can make is to simply neglect Scripture out of fear of misusing it. Because whenever we do use the Bible, the Holy Spirit can speak through it, even if we use it badly.

The gospels teach us to use Scripture, even if we are in danger of misusing it,

because the Holy Spirit speaks through the Bible. In the end, the best bits of our sermons will always be the Scripture quotations.



BEYOND LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE

Thinking more broadly than our entrenched positions, seeing the merits in the 'other side' and breaking through the 'left-right divide' means reading beyond our usual authors and areas. Here are a few suggestions.

BOOKS

ESSENTIALS: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue

John Stott and David Edwards
This 1988 book of arguments between a liberal and an evangelical is best known for John Stott's affirmation of annihilation as opposed to eternal conscious torment for those not in Christ, but it is one of the great examples of how Christians who disagree on key points (scriptural authority, miracles, morality, the deity of Christ) can debate and converse without resorting to either mud-slinging or a relativist position.

ADVENTURES IN MISSING THE POINT: How the Culture-controlled Church Neutered the Gospel

Brian D McLaren and Tony Campolo
An *Essentials* for our generation, or simply a progressive talking to a liberal about contentious issues within the Church, the approach here is refreshing. Campolo and McLaren, who disagree on many things, take turns in writing chapters and responses to chapters in what can at times be a maddening read but which can also be liberating in terms of providing space to ask questions about subjects like salvation, the end times, homosexuality, sin and postmodernism.

I AND THOU

Martin Buber
A great work of both philosophy and theology, *I and Thou* sets out

not just a way in which human beings can relate to God but how we can learn to relate to one another without reducing our respective humanities to objects. The distinction between I-thou and I-it relationships can be very helpful when attempting to understand and dialogue with those we believe to be wrong about important things.

JUST SEX: Is it ever just sex?

Guy Brandon
'Can we have a more just approach to sex?' asks a Jubilee Centre writer and thinker. Brandon questions whether consent alone is enough to sanction sexual relationship.

PARADOXOLOGY

Krish Kandiah
Suffering, genocide and God's sovereignty considered in terms of apparent paradox – *Paradoxology* approaches difficult and often avoided questions in an accessible and practical way.

THE JESUS SCANDALS

David Instone-Brewer
Christianity columnist Instone-Brewer has for years been entertaining and informing readers with his insights into Scripture that tend to challenge both liberals and conservatives on their prejudices.

WEB

WHY I AM NOT A LIBERAL CHRISTIAN

Roger E Olson
<http://bit.ly/1zSRUy7>
Professor of theology at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, gives refreshingly unpolemic reasons.

CAN LIBERAL CHRISTIANITY BE SAVED?

Ross Douthat
<http://nyti.ms/1EtteZW>
A 2012 *New York Times* column that ruffled more than a few feathers in America's Episcopal Church.

CAN CHRISTIANITY BE SAVED?

Diana Butler Bass
<http://huff.to/1zSTr7m>
A response to Ross Douthat that suggests that liberal Christianity might save the Church.

THE PROBLEM WITH CHRISTUS VICTOR

Mark Galli
<http://bit.ly/1GYVVL2>
Managing Editor at *Christianity Today* Galli highlights pros and cons of this increasingly popular theory of atonement.

CATALYST LIVE VIDEOS

bmscatalystlive.com/videos
Some of the best minds in Christian thinking today ask and answer challenging questions about faith, culture, art and society that are likely to challenge liberals and conservatives equally.



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