

**“WHY BOTHER WITH THE BIBLE?”**

***2 Timothy 3:16***

This morning, as always, we have read from the Bible and sung songs based very closely on passages from the Bible. During the week there will be various groups connected with the church which give an opportunity to discuss particular issues in the light of what the Bible says about them. We have an expectation that people will read the Bible in some form or other between Sundays. And we have, this morning, presented a Bible to our Mayor. One of the things Colin has decided to do this year is to quote from Doctor Johnson every time he speaks in public – and Doctor Johnson did, indeed, utter many memorable quotations – but there are far more phrases and aphorisms and references that have passed into common English usage that have their origin in the Bible than there are from Dr Johnson or Shakespeare (the second most common source). So why do we bother with the Bible?

There’s no doubt in the minds of many people, I don’t think, that the Bible is a great piece of world literature and well worth having a look at from that literary point of view – especially in the old King James Version. But as Christians we invest it with a certain amount of authority as well. It is explicitly stated that it is the basis of our creedal statements and the lens through which we look at life. In many contexts, though, if you quote the Bible as a source of authority in matters of faith and life, people will think you are off your head or will try to denigrate you by describing you as a “fundamentalist” or “intellectually naïve”. Unfortunately, there doesn’t seem to be anything to put in its place and those who try to dismiss it have to grope around a bit for any other source of authority.

Of course, the objections which many people raise against the Bible can seem very plausible and have a germ of truth about them which can easily fool us into believing that they really do have a point. And I’m sure we are all familiar with some of the most common objections.

Many people say that the Bible is the work of ordinary human beings, people with their own faults and shortcomings, so we can’t put any more faith in it than in any other book produced by fallible authors. And it is, indeed, true that the Bible was written by ordinary, sinful people. It is precisely that which gives the many books of the Bible their variety and, for some, their interest. The background and the personality of the various authors need to be taken into account as with any other work of literature. Yet each of these writers, we believe, was operating under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: God was working with and through their natural gifts and abilities to bring his message to the world. If a person becomes a Christian as he listens to, say, Billy Graham, we don’t say that that conversion is invalid because Billy Graham is a sinful human being: we rejoice that God has used that man to be the means of salvation for another. So we see God at work in the writings of the different biblical authors.

Other people object that the Bible is scientifically untrue and contains factual errors, so we can't accept it as God's word, because he should know that such things were wrong. We mustn't forget, though, that the Bible is not a scientific textbook – it is not written to communicate a series of scientific facts. That's a bit like the reviewer who wrote in *Country Life* magazine (I think) that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was not a very good guide for anyone wanting to become a gamekeeper! As far as factual accuracy goes, in historical terms there is very little that conflicts with what archaeology tells us, and each year new discoveries are made which confirm the accuracy of the biblical accounts. As far as some of the writers go – and Luke is a good example – historians reckon that their historical accuracy is better than any other existing records. Let's not forget that God used people who were living in particular historical settings to communicate his word and their experience and vocabulary were limited. Much of what so easily passes for scientific fact today is also lacking in the kind of hard proof that so many demand from the Bible.

And then there are those who complain that the Bible does not address contemporary issues, that Moses, Jesus, Paul and the others didn't fully understand all that we know now. Therefore we cannot take seriously what the Bible might have to say about sexual ethics or economic justice or theories of war. We have moved on from what's in the Bible, we maintain; our world is more complex and we must discard such outdated notions. But the fact that we have moved on does not negate the validity of the ideals proclaimed in the Bible. Once again, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the writers have set out the standards that God expects from his creation. That fact that we choose to reject those standards, and reject them in such great numbers, does not invalidate them. The Bible does indeed speak to today's culture, but we choose to ignore it or explain it away. And once again we have to say that no-one has come up with an effective alternative to the Bible, a book (or even a system) which can speak to the whole range of human experience. In his recent book *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins savages religion (and Christianity in particular) for being at the root of so many of the world's wars, choosing to ignore the part which atheistic and secular systems have played in a far greater number of conflicts.

The authority which the Bible has is an authority which is both bestowed and inherent. The authority which it is accorded by other people is one way of seeing how important it is. Jesus made extensive use of what we now call the Old Testament in his teaching and preaching and obviously thought that it was an authoritative work. The writers of the Gospels and other writers and preachers of the New Testament quoted the Old Testament and frequently accorded it special honour. There is even some evidence that before the New Testament was complete as we have it now, some of Paul's writings were considered to be of great authority too. As the Councils of the Church met in the early centuries after Christ, so it was agreed that certain books were authoritative and therefore were to be included in what is now our Bible, and others were rejected. The inspiration of the Holy Spirit was as clearly at work in the choice of what

was included in our Bible as it was in the actual writing of the books. All this stuff that's being popularised at the moment in the wake of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, that the Church tried to suppress some writings, is a load of hogwash that has been circulating in various forms since the first century AD and has no basis in reality at all.

But there's an inherent authority in the Bible itself as well. In the words we read just now from Paul's letter to his young friend Timothy, the Bible is described as "*God-breathed*" (θεοπνευστος). We tend to think of that as referring to the inspiration of the Bible – and that's how it is translated in some versions – but the Greek word describes not so much the *breathing into the authors* as the *breathing out of God*. The Scriptures are the very breath of God himself. It is his means of revealing himself to men and women. All that we can know of God is here and the authority of the Bible is bound up in that. It is indeed "*Thus says the Lord*" and I don't think it is arrogant of us to proclaim that. Indeed, the arrogance comes when we think that we know better and so become selective over what we accept and what we reject from the Bible. As one writer (Clark Pinnock in *The Scripture Principle*) puts it: "*We do not come to the Bible wondering if it will tell the truth. We already trust it to tell the truth, and we come to discover what the truth is.*" It is a book which reveals God in all his infinite wisdom and awesome splendour and, once we realise that, we are able to submit to its authority more readily.

But let's move on to consider why this is such a good source of authority for our lives. If we acknowledge that God is the source of all authority – and I'm pretty well taking that as read this morning – then we see that, if the Bible is the word of God, it must communicate to us the best way to live and behave in this world. God is the Creator and this is, as we have so often said, his instruction book for getting the best out of his creation. If he made us, he knows how we function best and this book is his means of communicating that to us – "*The Maker's Instruction*". And if we do want to get the best out of life (personally and collectively), we need to take those instructions seriously and take them as a package. If I have a new appliance at home, I can't follow only the instructions that I think look good or that seem a bit more attractive than the others or don't take quite so much thought, and then discard all the others as the product of a naïve manufacturer. The thing won't work. Nor can we look into the Bible and say, "Yes, I'll follow that principle about not stealing because in this property-conscious society that seems to make sense, but don't expect me to stick with all that stuff about sexual morality because it was written by someone who doesn't know the first thing about life in the twenty-first century." At least, we can't say that and then expect to have a society which is based on stable relationships.

And taking it as a whole package leads us on to the next point, which is that the Bible shows a really amazing unity. When you think that it was written by a great number of authors over the space of several centuries, it really is remarkable that it all ties up. On the evening of the first Easter Sunday, Jesus

walked to Emmaus with a couple of despondent disciples and used the whole of the Old Testament to point his two companions towards his own story. The prophecies had been fulfilled, the predictions had come about. There is a clear underlying unity which cannot be denied and cannot be explained away by saying that people knew what the others were writing. My grandfather used to have a Bible which he used when he was preaching which had a hole drilled right the way through it and he had a red cord which passed through the hole. He used to say that the red cord was the story of salvation and wherever you open the Bible you'll find that red cord stretched across the page. Its unity has been recognised all down through the ages.

And the fact that it has been recognised as special for so long gives us another angle on its authority. That this is a very special book is attested by its preservation down through the centuries. However much people have tried to suppress it and destroy, its message has lived on. Whether it was the leaders of the Church in the Middle Ages, who for political reasons tried to prevent the laity reading it and actually imprisoned those who tried to learn Greek to seek out the truth in its pages; or the regimes of the communist, fascist and now Islamist countries which have suppressed its production so that single pages were passed around amongst believers and memorised; or the small ethnic groups which have had no version of the Bible in their own language – we have seen the word of God triumph in every situation. People have died preserving it and translation it. As Doctor Johnson said, *“The only method by which religious truth can be established is by martyrdom.”* Now, there are some hefty holes in that argument, but you can see what he's saying – there must be something about it if people are prepared to die for it. This is no ordinary book and we need to realise that as we thank God for its preservation. One of my favourite stories about it concerns the French philosopher Voltaire. He declared in the eighteenth century that the Bible would very soon be a forgotten book. The house in which he was living when he wrote that is now the headquarters of the French Bible Society!

And those who have had the privilege of reading it and have allowed it to speak into their own lives have found their lives transformed. The minister of the church where I was brought up used to do some open air preaching in the city centre (before my time, I must admit). He would attract a crowd by putting his hat on the ground and dancing around it, pointing at it and shouting “It's alive! It's alive!” When a small crowd had gathered, curious to know what kind of beast was under the hat, he would whip it off to reveal a Bible on the pavement. The writer of *The Letter to the Hebrews* describes the word of God as *“living and active” (Hebrews 4:12)*.

The story is told of Harry Ironside, a well-known preacher in the United States, who was on one occasion preaching on a street corner. One of the crowd, a well-known agnostic with whom Ironside had often crossed swords and who lectured on how the Bible could not be true, challenged the preacher to a public

debate in a lecture hall later that week on the subject of “Christianity versus Agnosticism”. The preacher agreed, on one condition – that the agnostic should bring with him two people: a man who had previously been a down-and-out but whose life had been transformed by hearing one of the agnostic’s lectures, and a prostitute who had given up her life on the streets because of the transformation that had been effected by agnosticism. Ironside undertook to bring along a hundred such people whose lives had been transformed by the Bible. The agnostic sadly declined, knowing that nothing could really have the same effect as the Bible can on people’s lives.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu is quoted as saying that when the white man came to Africa, they gave the Africans Bibles and when they were distracted took all their land. *“When they arrived, they had the Bible and we had the land. It wasn’t long before they had the land and we had the Bible.”* The end of the quotation is often missed off – *“and we got the better deal!”* As many of you here this morning know from your own experience, this book is dynamite – the word of God and the power of God are between its covers. And that’s why we bother with the Bible.

*(Housegroup notes on next page.)*

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**"The Bible is the work of ordinary human beings,** people with their own faults and shortcomings, so we can't put any more faith in it than in any other book produced by fallible authors." It is, indeed, true that the Bible was written by ordinary, sinful people. Yet each of these writers, we believe, was operating under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: God was working with and through their natural gifts and abilities to bring his message to the world.

**"The Bible is scientifically untrue and contains factual errors,** so we can't accept it as God's word." We mustn't forget, though, that the Bible is not a scientific textbook – it is not written to communicate a series of scientific facts.

**"The Bible does not address contemporary issues:** Moses, Jesus, Paul and the others didn't fully understand all that we know now." Once again, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the writers have set out the standards that God expects from his creation. That fact that we choose to reject those standards, and reject them in such great numbers, does not invalidate them. The Bible does indeed speak to today's culture, but we choose to ignore it or explain it away.

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- God is the Creator and this is his instruction book for getting the best out of his creation.
- The Bible shows a really amazing unity which has been recognised all down through the ages.
- That this is a very special book is attested by its preservation down through the centuries. However much people have tried to suppress it and destroy, its message has lived on.
- Those who have had the privilege of reading it and have allowed it to speak into their own lives have found their lives transformed. The writer of *The Letter to the Hebrews* describes the word of God as "*living and active*" (*Hebrews 4:12*).

### **Questions for discussion**

1. Why did God entrust the writing of the Bible to human beings rather than just leave a copy lying round, or dictate it to a prophet (like the *Q'ran* or *The Book Of Mormon*?)
2. What do you understand by "*God-breathed*"?
3. How would you respond to someone who said to you that the Bible is irrelevant today?
4. How can we decide which bits of the Bible we are to take literally and which bits we need to re-interpret?
5. In what way is the Bible "*living and active*"?
6. How has the Bible affected your life?