

WHY IS THE BIBLE IMPORTANT?

Christians believe that God has spoken to his world. They also believe that he still speaks to his world. One of the ways that he does this is through the Bible, sometimes also called the Scriptures.

Many people in recent years have explored the Christian faith through the Alpha course. In the book that underpins the course, Nicky Gumbel says this about the Bible:

Paul [an early Christian leader] wrote of the inspiration of the Scriptures that were available to him: “All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that God’s servant may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The Greek word for “God-breathed” is *theopneustos*. It is often translated as “inspired by God”; but literally it means “God-breathed”. The writer is saying that Scripture is God speaking. Of course he used human authors. The Bible was written over a period of 1,500 years by at least forty authors from a wide variety of backgrounds – kings, scholars, philosophers, fishermen, poets, statesmen, historians and doctors. The Bible is 100 per cent the work of human beings but it is also 100 per cent inspired by God (just as Jesus is fully human and fully God).¹

¹ Gumbel, N., *Questions of Life*, 2nd ed, Alpha International (2010) pp. 82–83

This is important because for Christians, the teaching of the Bible is the God-given guide to what we believe and to how we behave. In any discussion on any moral topic, the Christian's first response will be, "What does the Bible say about that?"

Someone may object, "How on earth can you be serious about a book that is already some 2,000 years old, and some of it much older?" In what other area of life would you turn to something as old as that for advice?" Another objection might be, "Who says that the Bible is the word of God? What's the authority behind that claim?"

If the Bible is one way in which God speaks to us, the coming of Jesus Christ to this earth is another, and is indeed the supreme way. This is how one of the Bible writers puts it:

"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven."²

Humanly speaking, Jesus was born into a family in Palestine about 2,000 years ago. But events around the time of his birth, and then the way his life unfolded, left some convinced that Jesus was more than a human being.

² Hebrews 1: 1-3

Even at the age of 12 he showed an awareness of being God's son and, in conversation with the religious teachers of the time, astonished all who heard him by his understanding and his answers.³ When he left the carpenter's shop and became a preacher instead, people hung on his words. He could speak about God with an authority which even the religious leaders did not have.⁴ Miracles were common around Jesus. He healed the sick, calmed a storm, raised the dead to life and much, much more. In his hands a boy's small picnic became a meal for thousands. So it continued for three years, and gradually the impression grew among some that God was in their midst.

All of this came to a shuddering halt one Friday. Following a long period of hostility towards him by some religious leaders who were jealous of his powers, Jesus had been arrested the evening before and the judge, despite believing that Jesus was innocent, caved in to the hostile crowd and handed him over for execution. By the Friday afternoon it was all over. Jesus was dead. So they buried him in a tomb and sealed it.

Two days later a strange rumour started to circulate. First of all, the tomb was empty but the wrappings around Jesus' body were exactly where they would have been if the body had still been there. Then one, and another and another became convinced that they had seen Jesus alive in a new way and that he had actually spoken to them. Gradually the conviction grew and spread that God had raised Jesus from death to life and that Jesus was now alive. Then his followers remembered that Jesus had

³ Luke 2: 41–52

⁴ Matthew 7: 28–29

told them when he was with them that this would happen, but at the time it just did not register what he was talking about.

Over the next six weeks the risen Jesus appeared and reappeared to his followers, and more than 500 people became convinced that he really was alive. Jesus also spent time giving instructions to his inner circle and teaching them further about the kingdom of God. Shortly before leaving them to rejoin his Father in heaven, he told them to wait in Jerusalem till they were given the power they needed to be God’s witnesses worldwide. Their commission was to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”⁵

Ten days later God’s power fell on the waiting believers in the person of the Holy Spirit. Convinced that the moment had come, they began to share their faith. The worldwide spread of Jesus’s message was under way and has continued to the present day. It is also part of Christian belief that at some point in the future, a point that God will determine, Jesus will return to judge all people of every nation and generation, and then a new era in God’s plan will begin.

It is central to the belief of the Christian Church that Jesus was and is the Son of God. A carpenter and preacher, yes, but fully God as well as fully man.

This brings us back to a question asked earlier in this section, “Who says that the Bible is the word of God?” The short answer

⁵ Matthew 28: 19–20

to that is that Jesus, the Son of God, says that the Bible is the word of God. That needs some further explanation.

If you open a Bible it is divided into two sections. The first part is called the Old Testament. This part contains the holy writings of the Jews and, as he grew up, Jesus would have heard these read in the synagogue week by week. This was the record of what God had done for his people and what he had said to them down the centuries until the time of Jesus. For them this was the word of God.

That was also Jesus's view of these writings. He studied the Old Testament carefully and shaped his life and teaching in accordance with it. He regarded it as inspired by God and as authoritative both for himself and for others.⁶

The New Testament, the second part of the Bible, did not then exist, but Jesus made provision for its writing. Out of the many people who followed him Jesus chose a particular group of 12 people to be his inner circle. He called them "apostles"⁷. The word conveys the idea of being "official representatives". They had particularly close contact with Jesus from the start of his work in public and all except Judas Iscariot were witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. (By then Judas was dead.) As well as the ability to perform miracles, Jesus assured them that the Holy Spirit of God would give them special help in recalling his words and in deepening their understanding when he was no longer with them.⁸

⁶ E.M.B. Green, *The Authority of Scripture*, Falcon Booklets (1963) pp.11–17

⁷ A few were added later such as Matthias, Paul, James the Lord's brother, and perhaps one or two others. See footnote 9 below.

⁸ John 14: 25–26; John 16: 12–15.

It seems reasonable to infer from these arrangements that Jesus was, among other things, putting in place the group of people who would compile the authoritative record of his life, death, resurrection and ascension into heaven and of all that flowed from those events. Their record would also be the authoritative record of the teaching of Jesus. This is how the early Christians saw it because when, in the fourth century after Jesus, the Church came finally to settle which writings should be in the New Testament and which not, the test was whether a particular writing had come from the hand of an apostle, or, if it hadn't, had it at least come from someone close to the apostolic circle and have apostolic authority behind it.⁹

To sum up, Christians regard the Bible as the word of God because of the authority of Jesus Christ. He, the Son of God, regarded the Old Testament as the word of God. He, the Son of God, laid the foundation for the writing of the New Testament. Can this book have any greater authority behind it? Our own opinions are simply that – our own opinions. They can be formed by those close to us, by society in general, by our own make-up and by our own preferences. But if God has spoken on a particular matter, then that is to be the Christian's guide both for what we believe and for how we behave.

The question may then be asked, whether, as Christians, we are meant to follow every word of the Bible exactly as it was written, and the answer to that is no. The Old Testament charts the journey of God's people over centuries, and in that time God was gradually teaching them about himself. But the practice of

⁹ J.R.W. Stott, *Understanding the Bible*. Scripture Union (2003) Chapter 6

sacrificing animals to pay for sin, for example, which we find in the Old Testament and which helped people to understand the seriousness of sin, was made redundant once Jesus Christ died on the cross. Once that had happened animal sacrifice had no further purpose. So the ceremonial law of the Old Testament was set aside, but what about the moral law?

There are Christians who believe that the Bible should have no back cover on it. In other words, Jesus has set the ball rolling but it is up to each new generation to work things out as seems best to them, and not be tied to the teaching of the past. For example, some who argue in favour of homosexual activity will say that our psychological insights today are so much more up to date and advanced that we cannot possibly be limited by teaching which is 2,000 years old. They will also say that, whereas casual promiscuous sex may be ruled out, that is quite different from sexual activity within a stable, loving and faithful relationship.

Someone has framed the question like this:

How can a divine revelation given in transient cultural terms have permanent validity? How can a revelation addressed to a particular cultural situation have a universal application? Does not the cultural conditioning of Scripture limit its relevance to us, and even its authority over us?¹⁰

John Stott, who asks that question, goes on to answer it along the following lines. All of us have several sets of clothes, such as our work clothes, our party clothes, our doing-dirty-jobs clothes and

¹⁰ J.R.W. Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, InterVarsity Press (1995) p.194

our night clothes. But, regardless of which set of clothes I am wearing at any one time, the person underneath does not change, and my character and personality remain the same. So it is with God. God revealed his will to the writers of the Bible over a period of some 1,500 years and in many different cultures. Jesus himself was born into a particular culture at a particular time. What matters is not the culture (the clothes), but what God has said, commanded, forbidden and promised.

For example, in John chapter 13, we read how Jesus, on the night before his death, washed the feet of his disciples, a job commonly done in Palestine by a slave. Such an action made perfect sense at the time because roads were dusty and guests arriving at a house needed to freshen up. Nowadays, however, willingness to do the menial tasks would take a different form, like being willing to bag up the rubbish for the binmen, or clean up the mess the cat has made on the carpet. The setting (the clothes) has changed, but the willingness to do the unpleasant tasks has not.

God's nature does not change, and as Christians we are not free to depart from what God in Scripture teaches, forbids, promises or commands. In the New Testament Jesus consistently upholds God's moral law. "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."¹¹ So, far from setting aside God's moral law, Jesus deepens and extends it. For example, when speaking about

¹¹ Matthew 5: 19

adultery, he makes it clear that it is not just the act of adultery that is wrong, but the lustful thought behind the act.¹²

So in trying to solve any moral problem the Christian's guiding principle will be to ask what God's word says about it. And when Christians try to set forth what the Bible teaches on any issue, they aspire to set forth not their own opinions but what they believe that God says through his word.

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¹² Matthew 5: 27–28