

The Authority of the Bible

Ideas for leading a Conversation

These sessions are based on the format pioneered by Agora. For general guidance in running these sessions see 'Planning a Conversation' at www.agoraspace.org

Background

The place of the Bible is a very important issue for Christians. This conversation looks at the way that we see the Bible, how we read it and how we relate to it. One of the characteristics of the emergent church is a re-examination of the place of the Bible and a variety of innovative approaches to it. Attitudes of other traditions have also enriched this exercise. In addition, the transition from modernism to post-modernism has provided a critique of the evangelical doctrine of the Bible.

Starter questions for small group discussion

1. In what ways do you think that the Bible is a divine book and in what ways is it human?
2. Do you believe that the type of inspiration that produced the Bible is unique, or do you think that the same type of inspiration is possible today?
3. Given that much of scripture is written from a culture with a metaphorical viewpoint, what new ways of handling the Bible are suggested?
4. How do you deal with issues that are not mentioned by the Bible? Are they dealt with in your belief system?

One way through the conversation

Do not feel tied to this.

Begin the evening with Question One.

In what ways do you think that the Bible is a divine book and in what ways is it human?

Introduce the first question. Outline aspects that could be discussed:

- § Age - The Bible is a library of books written over 4,000 years
- § Genre
- § Culture
- § The nature of inspiration

Discuss this in small groups and then gather together the views expressed.

The aim here is to enable people to think about the Bible. Many Christians use a formula – 'The Bible is the word of God', and think no further. Other groups think of the Bible as purely human, but need to consider inspiration.

In considering the range of books in the Bible we could consider:

Age: Job is widely believed to be the oldest book C1500BC. A quarter of it cannot be safely translated.

Judges covers the transition from bronze age to iron age.

How we got the canon

Genre: Poetry, History, Myth, Play, Song, Vision, liturgy

Culture: OT covers 2,000 years and hence huge culture changes. From times of human sacrifice, through to the Babylonian exile. Hebrew thinking and language (see resources – Hebrew World view)

Examples of misunderstanding: celtic obsession with nature. Obsession with Israel.

Scripture as incarnation

Inspiration

Poetry, Play, Song, Myth – the creative urge

History – no clear inspiration

Prophecy/Vision – men moved by the Spirit wrote.

Liturgy – Creative combined with Theology

Continue to Question Two.

Do you believe that the type of inspiration that produced the Bible is unique, or do you think that the same type of inspiration is possible today?

Consideration should be made of the genres present in the Bible and the various forms that inspiration would take. On what the Bible itself says about inspiration and what our society considers inspirational.

Examples of inspiration

History –

Poetry – Paradise Lost

Play/Novel – LoTR, That Hideous Strength, Tolstoy, Dostoyefsky

Song –

Myth – Pilgrim's Progress

Prophecy/Vision – MLK Jr, Gandhi, Berlin wall, student in Tianahmen square

Liturgy –

Excerpt from Saint Joan – George Bernard Shaw

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Captain Robert de Baudricourt questions St Joan

Joan : I hear voices telling me what to do. They came from God.
Robert : They come from your imagination.
Joan : Of course. That is how the messages of God come to us.
Poulengey: Checkmate.

Continue to Question 3

Given that much of scripture is written from a culture with a metaphorical viewpoint, what new ways of handling the Bible are suggested?

We would hope that a series of playful options would be suggested, but the following should help

- § Paraphrasing. The recent series of books such as 'The Message' or 'The Street Bible'. Rabbis used to write paraphrases. Midrash.
- § Storytelling. Whether the practice of retelling redemption history or retelling Bible (and other) stories.
- § Poetry from a point of view.
- § Plays/drama
- § Meditations – on scripture or on retold scripture
- § Liturgy
- § Creative attempts to express the word within our culture
- § Serious Bible study and theological study

Continue to Question 4

How do you deal with issues that are not mentioned by the Bible? Are they dealt with in your belief system?

Issues include

- § Birth Control
- § Abortion
- § GM Crops
- § Cloning
- § Euthanasia
- § Child abuse
- § Masturbation
- § Foetus/fertility treatment
- § Animal rights
- § Genetic modification of animals for agriculture
- § Response to terrorism

Resources

Evangelical View of Scripture

Evangelical understanding of the Bible is influenced by two periods in history: the reformation and the emergence of liberalism. Doctrines were formulated in reaction to the excesses of papal authority and further refined as a defence from the assaults of higher criticism.

From early protestantism, the authority of the Bible was established as an alternative to the corrupt authority of the Papal hierarchy, and “sola scriptura” (the Bible alone) became the protestant motto.

The evangelical revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries emphasised personal salvation, holiness of life and the need to preach the gospel. And elevated the passages concerned with these themes.

The Four Characteristics of Scripture¹

1. Authority

The authority of scripture means that all the words of scripture are God's words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God.

The inerrancy of scripture means that scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact.

2. Clarity

The clarity of scripture means that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who read it seeking God's help and being willing to follow it.

3. Necessity

The necessity of scripture means that the Bible is necessary for knowing the gospel, for maintaining spiritual life, and for knowing God's will, but it is not necessary for knowing that God exists or for knowing something about God's character and moral laws.

4. Sufficiency

The sufficiency of scripture means that scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains all the words of God we need for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly.

Orthodox View of Scripture

The Orthodox Church has a different take on the status of the Bible and its position as an authority.

'The Bible is the supreme expression of God's revelation to the human race, and Christians must always be 'People of the Book'. But if Christians are People of the Book, the Bible is the Book of the People; it must not be regarded as something set up *over* the Church, but as something that lives and is understood *within* the Church (that is why one should not separate Scripture and Tradition). It is from the Church that the Bible ultimately derives its authority, for it was the Church which originally decided which books form a part of Holy Scripture; and it is the Church alone which can interpret Holy Scripture with authority. There are many sayings in the Bible which by themselves are far from clear, and individual readers, however sincere, are in danger of error if they trust their own personal interpretation. 'Do you understand what you are reading?' Philip asked the Ethiopian eunuch; and the Eunuch replied, 'How can I, unless

¹ Taken from Wayne Grudem, 'Systematic Theology : an introduction to biblical doctrine' (IVP, 1994) GB ISBN 0-85110-652-8

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someone guides me?' (Acts viii, 30-1). Orthodox, when they read the Scripture, accept the guidance of the Church. When received into the Orthodox Church, a convert promises, 'I will accept and understand Holy Scripture in accordance with the interpretation which was and is held by the Holy Orthodox Catholic Church of the East, our Mother.'²

Post-evangelical

In many ways the word post-evangelical was coined as a critique of the evangelical attitude to the Bible.

Criticisms are:

Defending inerrancy is a monumental waste of time. Inaccuracies exist in the Bible. The attempts to resolve them can lead to results that are farcical. The Bible itself does not claim to be inerrant.

Instead, the post-evangelical world has looked at other theologies for their view of the Bible. In particular, Karl Barth's view of the word of God. That there are three uses for the term 'word of God': the living word, the written word and the proclaimed word. That the Bible is a human book, 'pregnant with revelation', which it yields when read in an inspired way. The Bible has two dimensions: the human and the divine. The Bible can 'become' the word of God.

The term 'word of God' is a metaphor. God does not have a mouth. Nor does he have arms. God is too big to put into words. Any statement about God and about theological truth is a symbolic revelation that conveys truth, not a proposition of absolute truth. Eg. 'God is a father' is Biblical truth, but it is also true that 'God is not a father'.

There is no-one who interprets all scripture literally, whatever they officially claim. More reasoned discussion should be had as to where the literal/figurative line should be drawn.

There is no 'view from nowhere'. Things can only be understood from the inside. Faith grows through a combination of living the faith plus rigorous self-criticism.³

Definitions of Genres – Webster's Dictionary.

Lit'ur`gy Pronunciation: līt'ūr`jŷ

n. 1. An established formula for public worship, or the entire ritual for public worship in a church which uses prescribed forms; a formulary for public prayer or devotion. In the Roman Catholic Church it includes all forms and services in any language, in any part of the world, for the celebration of Mass.

Myth

n. 1. A story of great but unknown age which originally embodied a belief regarding some fact or phenomenon of experience, and in which often the forces of nature and of the soul are personified; an ancient legend of a god, a hero, the origin of a race, etc.; a wonder story of prehistoric origin; a popular fable which is, or has been, received as historical.

Po'et`ry

n. 1. The art of apprehending and interpreting ideas by the faculty of imagination; the art of idealizing in thought and in expression.

2. Imaginative language or composition, whether expressed rhythmically or in prose. Specifically: Metrical composition; verse; rhyme; poems collectively; as, heroic poetry; dramatic poetry; lyric or Pindaric poetry.

² Taken from Timothy Ware, 'The Orthodox Church' (Penguin, 1997)

³ Most points in this section from Dave Tomlinson, 'The Post-Evangelical' (Triangle, 1995)

Hebrew World View⁴

SCIENTIFIC WORLDVIEW	POETIC WORLDVIEW
Precise	Imprecise
Reason/Intellect	Emotions/Intuition
Permanent	Provisional
Physical	Spiritual
Absolute	Ambiguous
Science/Technology	Values
Propositional	Approximate
Western Culture	Ethnic Worldviews
Rational	Intuitive
Men	Women
Literal	Symbolic
Church	Spiritual quest
Worship	Personal needs

To a large extent, the two columns can be identified with the qualities of left-brain thinking (the 'scientific worldview') and right-brain thinking (the 'poetic worldview'). Though there is a good deal of debate about the precise difference between Hebrew (biblical) thinking and Greek (secular) thinking, it would not be misleading to identify, in addition, the scientific column with the Greeks and the poetic column with the Hebrews, at least if we use these terms in a typological sense.

⁴ Taken from – J Drane, 'Faith in a Changing Culture' (Marshall Pickering 1997) pg 35