

***Paper for Awesome/Reform consultation: Tuesday, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010***

*(essentially the transcript of a recent Reform leaflet, with one or two additions for our gathering. The leaflet reflects John Stott's 1999 Zondervan edition of his "Understanding the Bible")*

'You can make the Bible mean whatever you want' so say some foolish people, and this is only the case when basic commonsense rules that apply to understanding any book are jettisoned when it comes to reading the Word of God.

First, we should look for the *obvious or natural* sense. We are not literalists, but we do take Scripture seriously as we look for the plain meaning of any passage. This means that we take into account what genre or style of literature we are reading, for the Bible is made up of history, poetry, prophecy, metaphor and, somewhat strange for us, apocalyptic. When we read that trees sing for joy and floods clap their hands, we understand that this is poetry. When Jesus told us to be harmless as doves, we are not meant to lay eggs. When he said, 'A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho', it is a story, a parable, not history. This is just common sense. The Bible is not written in a code for which we have to search for some elusive key. When Jesus said, 'No one comes to the Father but by me', he meant exactly what he said, namely, that he was the exclusive way to the Father.

Second, we are to look for the *original* sense. That is to say we are to put ourselves in the shoes of those to whom the particular book or letter that we are reading was addressed. While there is a wonderful timelessness about God's Word, different parts of the Bible were written to particular people at particular times. This does not mean that we need to know anything outside what the Bible contains (see Article VI of the 39 Articles). Frequently the prophets tell us in what era they were writing, and whether it was to the Northern Kingdom (Israel) or to the Southern Kingdom (Judah). By the same token Paul's letters tell us of the situations he was addressing. So for instance, if we 'go to Corinth' when reading 1 Corinthians, we discover that the church there was full of life, full of questions, full of problems and full of themselves ('puffed up'). This will enable us to see that chapter 13, far from being a glorious passage about love, would have been received as a painfully stinging rebuke.

Thirdly, we are to look for the *harmony* of Scripture. Although there are 66 books with about 30 different writers spread over a thousand years using three different languages, behind all that there is the One Author, the Holy Spirit, who spoke by his prophets in the Old Testament and likewise inspired the New Testament authors. We would therefore expect complementary truths, but no contradictions. Our God cannot contradict himself. So we shall never interpret one passage of the Bible in such a way

that it 'repugnant to' or contradicts another passage (see Article XX). The Bible is its own interpreter. The New Testament is the God-given interpretation of the Old Testament, and the New Testament needs no further interpretative agent. This harmony or unity of Scripture is indeed very wonderful and is a major reason for believing that the Bible is the inspired Word of God.

There are further practical tips for understanding the Bible:

- 1) We shall recognise that spiritual truth must be spiritually discerned, and therefore shall cry to the Holy Spirit to open our otherwise blind eyes so that we might truly understand his Word.
- 2) We shall realise that we are not meant merely to read this Bible, but rather to feed on it. This involves unhurriedly meditating on it; chewing it over; letting it 'percolate' or 'marinate'. Too often we do not understand the Bible simply because we have not given ourselves enough time to 'think over' what is said (2 Timothy 2.7).
- 3) I shall accept that the Bible is not lots of little messages to me, but rather it is telling me great truths about the Lord God and his purposes – in the light of which I shall need to amend my life.
- 4) We shall be careful about deriving doctrine from narrative passages. The historical and narrative parts of the Bible may well illustrate Biblical truths, but they do not primarily teach them. The story of Abraham may well illustrate the 'obedience of faith', but it is primarily about how God fulfilled his promise to give Abraham a son and a people. By the same token Nehemiah may well have some useful tips about leadership (though ultimately he failed!), but the book of his name is there to show us that spiritually the exile was not over although many had returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. Nor can we derive evangelistic strategies from the Acts of the Apostles!

To understand the Bible we therefore need to come to it humbly, seriously, reverently and obediently.

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*The leaflet is aimed at the average Anglican lay person and is itself the summary of a whole chapter.*

One thing it leaves me thinking about is how central the relationship of man and woman, especially in marriage, is to the relationship that God has with his people in Creation and in Redemption. This might perhaps be an example of the overarching harmony of the Scriptures. It is made explicit in Ephesians 5 in a way that is nowhere bettered, but it seems implicit in so much from Genesis to the prophets to the teaching of Jesus and that of his apostles, notably Peter and Paul. I notice that it is only 'in heaven', in the resurrection, that there is no marriage, and until human marriage is transcended by our relationship with the Lord being brought to fulfilment and perfection in glory, then the model and distinctives of marriage, albeit redeemed and being transformed by Christ, are retained in both the human home and in the Lord's household.