

Table Talk Topics **4th November 2005**

Can I propose two sets of topics for our next meeting at Villa Bethel on 4th November 2005.

1. Was Jesus' death on the cross necessary and right, or was it "the first case of cosmic child abuse" (Steve Chalke, 2004).
2. As regards the Old Testament
 - Do you think it is textually reliable?
 - Do you think it is an historically reliable account?
 - Do you think it is relevant to our Christianity today?

Please let me know if you don't like the subjects or want to add a supplementary item.

Was the cross necessary and right or was it the first case of cosmic child abuse?

In seeking to (over)emphasise the Love of God in comparison with His justice and righteousness there has recently been a tendency amongst evangelical Christians to completely abandon classical theories of the atonement. This has even led to the description of the cross as "cosmic child abuse" (Steve Chalke in the lost message of Jesus). In my opinion this view of the cross as essentially the culmination of the non-violent philosophy of Jesus is to ignore the seriousness of sin and to seriously undermine the role and work of Jesus as the sin bearer – the means of our salvation. Indeed, on such a view, one could almost regard a Ghandi or a Martin Luther-King as a modern day Jesus.

Most people do not realise the seriousness of sin. God expects us to keep ALL of His laws ALL of the time. His pass mark is 100%. As it says in Exodus 20:5 "... for I am the Lord your God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation ..".

The seriousness of sin, even sin itself, are not acceptable topics in contemporary society. Popular authors have remarked on it. Karl Menninger, an American psychiatrist has even written a book entitled *Whatever Became of Sin?* Does this mean, he says, that no sin is involved in our current troubles? No, indeed not. He concludes that the vast majority of the problems in our world today result from a failure to respect God's laws. Actually, the fact that we downplay the importance of sin is well illustrated by the fact that we have only one word for it. In the Greek of the New Testament, there are no less than five words for sin, both passive and active.

At first sight, the idea of death being a necessary component of the forgiveness of sin sounds like primitive superstition, but the more it is examined, the more it makes sense.

Those who express the view that God could simply forgive us are lacking a balanced view of the gravity of sin on the one hand and the majesty and nature of God on the other. God IS completely loving BUT he is also completely just and completely righteous and all these aspects of his nature are unchanging and unchangeable. God's nature is immutable – unchanging, unchangeable and absolute. He is absolutely loving and wants to forgive us, but he is also absolutely just and couldn't simply forget about our sin. God acts in accordance with ALL of his attributes ALL of the time. The problem of forgiveness was not in the world, it was within God.

Sin is a rebellion against God's laws and a law which has no sanction against breaking it is no law at all. It is inconceivable that God's moral laws could be of that kind. The sanction against breach of these moral laws, in other words the sanction against sin, is death. In the words of Romans 6:23 "the wages of sin is death". This does not mean that God's laws are mechanical, they are alive in God a part of his nature and that unchanging nature makes them unalterable.

If we try to bring God down to our level, or try and raise ourselves to his level, we see no need of a radical atonement to secure salvation. We need to hear again the words of Peter in 1 Peter 1:17 "since you call on a father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives ... in reverent fear". When we tremble before God and acknowledge that we are hell deserving sinners the necessity for the cross becomes clear. Perhaps if we spoke less about God's love and more about his holiness, we might say more with more meaning when we did speak of his love.

Nothing reveals the gravity of our sin like the cross. For what ultimately sent Christ there was neither the greed of Judas, nor the envy of the Jewish priests, nor the vacillating cowardice of Pilate, but our own greed, envy, cowardice and all our other sins. I cannot face Christ's cross with integrity without feeling ashamed of myself. Indeed, in the words of Canon Peter Green "only the man who is prepared to own his share in the guilt of the cross may claim his share in its grace". In the words of Isaiah "Christ was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." In other words, Christ died for my sins and yours to bring us forgiveness and healing.

Yet, we DO need to talk of God's love. His love was wonderful. Instead of abandoning us to our sin, as we deserved, he pursued us as the good shepherd pursues a lost sheep.

Really, there is only one simple reason for this – that was the only way the mission could be fulfilled. God's just and righteous punishment could not have been visited on any ordinary man. Our sins already justified our punishment by death – each and every one of us, so we could not act as a sacrifice for anyone else by suffering a punishment we already deserved. On the other hand, God could not suffer a punishment as God, because the guilty sinning party was mankind. Only someone who was both wholly God and wholly man – and that was uniquely Jesus – would do.

We need a balance between awareness of sin and awareness of forgiveness in our Christian lives. If we concentrate on the former we shall be sorrowful and guilt ridden (one author called Christianity the "guilt edged religion"), but if we focus too much on the latter we are likely to carry on sinning as if it didn't matter.

Let's now look at what Christ did for us. Christ took upon himself all the sins of the world past present and future. As he said on the cross "it has been and will for ever remain finished". Because he has paid the price for our sins, we are able to stand before God clothed in Christ's righteousness, to escape any condemnation for our sins and enter into salvation or eternal life.

This forgiveness is a free gift from God. Although it was purchased at great price by Christ's life blood all we have to do is to receive it. We cannot earn it or even contribute the smallest

element to it. In the words of Saint Paul in Ephesians 2:8-9 “For it is by grace you have been saved not by works so that no one can boast.”

Also, it's only true, we can only receive salvation, because Jesus willingly died and shed his blood on the cross to pay for my sins and yours. Yes it was by God's will. Again in the words of Isaiah “.. it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and the Lord makes of his life a guilt offering ...” But it was with the consent of Jesus who subordinated his will to the Father in the olive grove.

However, we do have to receive this grace, this forgiveness. The world was not automatically put right because Christ died for us, nor have we automatically been forgiven. We need to appropriate his death to ourselves in order for it to be effective. We need to turn to Christ in repentance, accept him as our Lord and acknowledge him with our lips.

We only recognise the need for a radical atonement when we acknowledge the seriousness of sin, but this atonement was provided by God's grace in His love for us. We need to keep a balance between these elements in our Christian lives.

The Reliability of the Old Testament

This is of course an enormous topic on which many books have been written and these notes do no more than touch on some of the main issues. Those who want to enquire further can consult *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* by K A Kitchen, *Archaeology & the Old Testament* by Alfred Hoerth and *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* by Josh McDowell.

The Old Testament (“OT”) of the Protestant Christian Bible is very similar to the original canon of Jewish scripture – The Tanak (the Law, the Prophets and the Writings). The Catholic OT Bible has 7 additional books (the Apocrypha) which were not accepted by all Jews as part of the Jewish Canon until the time of the finalisation of the Greek version of this (the Septuagint) in the second century AD (although versions of the Septuagint were available in Jesus' time). Some Jewish communities (e.g. the Ethiopians) only accept the reduced canon of the original Hebrew version to this day. Thus the Protestant Bible OT has 39 books whilst the Catholic OT has 46 books.

The Septuagint has some important textual differences with the Hebrew version, although Protestants largely follow the Septuagint version.

Much of the OT forms a continuous story from the world's beginnings, through the earliest Patriarch (Abraham), on into his descendants who became slaves in Egypt and later escaped with God's assistance (the Exodus). This enabled them to become a people and culminated in a monarchy, which briefly held an empire before splitting into two rival kingdoms (Judah and Israel). These lasted only for a relatively short time before they were conquered (Israel by Assyria in 722 BC and Judah by Babylon in 586 BC) and taken into exile. Eventually the Jewish people were released from their exile and rebuilt Jerusalem. To this story are added the writings of various prophets calling the people back to loyalty to their own God, statements of law (e.g. Leviticus) and various forms of 'wisdom' writings (e.g. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes etc.). Starting with Abraham this covers the period from around 2,000 BC to 400 BC.

The earliest versions of the manuscripts of the OT are the Dead Sea Scrolls dating from around the second century BC. The most vehement critics of the historicity of the OT would hold that ALL the OT was written just before this time and dismiss it as largely a work of pure fiction. In my view, the balance of the evidence is very definitely against such a late origin for the OT (see *Kitchen* at p499). Nor are they purely fiction. Indeed very little of their historical content has been disproved or even thrown into serious doubt. The periods where we have most correlative evidence (the divided monarchy, the exile and the return from exile) show a high degree of correlation with independent historic data. In earlier periods descriptions of the Patriarchs, the kings of the united monarchy etc are consistent with what we know of society at that time – but we cannot say much more. The evidence for or against simply does not exist – with the one exception of the mention of Israel on the stela of Merenptah.

Thus, in conclusion we can say that the OT comes out remarkably well as an historically reliable document. Its textual reliability is undoubted. The previously known manuscripts of the OT differ hardly at all from the Dead Sea Scrolls, which gives the OT a higher degree of textual reliability than any other historic document of comparable antiquity.

As regards the relevance of the OT to Christianity today this is again undoubted. Christianity grew out of Judaism. We worship the same God – Yahweh. Consequently, the history of the Jews as God's chosen people is of fundamental relevance to us today. Furthermore, we must remember that Jesus himself cited scripture (the OT) with complete approval and appealed to it as authoritative.

In the history of the Jews in the OT, we see the great need for Jesus as a redeeming saviour. Time and time again, they broke the covenants which they had solemnly made with God, were punished, repented and again fell into sin. Finally, this process became so protracted and the breach of the covenant became so widespread that God put an end to the Israelite nation and sent them into exile. In their history, we see the complete inability of humans to live under God's laws and to save themselves. In that light, the need for Jesus as a redemptive saviour is perfectly clear.

The OT also offers us many pointers to this redemptive saviour and his nature. There is the tenth plague before the exodus when the lamb was sacrificed to save the people from the punishment of the plague. There are the prophetic writings of Isaiah, particularly the so called 'servant songs' and most especially Isaiah 53.

There is much evidence that we are not merely reading our Christian message into the OT with the benefit of hindsight. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of the need for a new covenant which would be made in such a way that people would be empowered to keep its terms (Jeremiah 31:33) and that this would be done by God changing our hearts and putting his spirit within us (Ezekiel 11:19, 36:27). The prophets were disillusioned with the inability of the kings of Israel (and Judah) to lead the people in ways that would reflect God's standards and their expectations moved towards an ideal king who would be commissioned directly by God (Isaiah 9:6-7, 11:1-5; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Micah 5:2-5). These desires found their expression in Jesus.

The servant songs bear an interesting message here. The general view of the ideal king referred to above was as an all-powerful conquering king. However, the servant songs portray suffering and brokenness – images totally incompatible with the ideal king (or even

an ordinary king). Isaiah 53 contains two particular images which correlate very closely with Christ (a) that the servant though innocent suffers for the wrongdoings of others (Isaiah 53:4-9) and (b) that following this suffering God will vindicate the servant and make people realise that his suffering was in their place (Isaiah 53:10-12). This is for me a most striking and compelling vision and prophecy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In conclusion then I submit that the OT is important indeed fundamental to a complete understanding of the God whom we worship and the salvation which he has provided for us through His son.