

Appendix

An imaginary conversation

You seem to be saying that the UK has never had a Christian church. Is that right?

Yes. I suspect that the same may be true of other countries, but I cannot comment as I have no working knowledge of the church overseas.

Your attitude strikes me as arrogant. Who are you to write off two thousand years of church history?

Have you noticed that in paintings before 1900, galloping horses are shown with their front legs forward and their hind legs backward? It was only when moving film was invented that people discovered that horses don't gallop like that at all. Once this fact came to light, it was not arrogance to point it out, but a recognising of the true state of affairs.

I am sure there are many things wrong with my attitude, and the whole of the rest of my life as well. However, I am not being arrogant in my claims as my argument is not based on my own views but on what Jesus said. I suggest that the arrogance lies with those who have claimed to represent Christ by being church leaders while at the same time ignoring what he actually said. So while I can understand your feelings of outrage, I believe they are misplaced.

You continually quote the Bible, but I find that I often have to decide things which do not appear in the Bible. Isn't there a place for human wisdom as well?

Yes, there is. Many decisions cannot be settled by an appeal to Scripture. However, when it comes to running a church, and the associated issues we have been discussing, then the teaching of Jesus must be our starting point, surely. What has happened so often is that supposed human wisdom has been allowed to replace the instructions Jesus gave. This is unacceptable.

You base your argument on the Bible, but you ignore church tradition. Why?

Some people hold that two thousand years of church practice carries its own authority. They might say that whatever Christianity may once have been, it has grown and developed along certain lines and has a life of its own. They would see my work as an unhelpful attempt to put the clock back. My reply is that the only authority the church has is a derived authority, which comes from Jesus himself. Aspects of current church teaching which have become different from his should be seen as being wrong, and abandoned.

You even seem willing to apply this principle of the authority of Jesus to other parts of the New Testament itself.

Yes. If there are discrepancies between the teaching of Paul, Peter or John and the teaching of Jesus, then the teaching of Jesus is to have priority.

Are there discrepancies of this kind in the New Testament?

I don't believe there are. However, it is possible to lift something from the New Testament and apply it without reference to the gospels in a way which distorts what Jesus said. This is a wrong use of the New Testament text; it should be used to illuminate the teaching of Jesus.

Can you think of an example?

Yes. I was once at a church service where the leader began by turning us to Ephesians. He read out Paul's words encouraging people to "sing and make music in their hearts to the Lord". He then said that meant "with all their hearts", and so we were going to spend a while singing God's praises with all our hearts.

What's wrong with that?

The leader made two mistakes. Firstly, he altered the text so that it said what he wanted it to say, which was different from what it actually said. If this feels harsh, then try and think of any other use of the word "in" where you can substitute "with all" without changing the meaning. I've tried without success. If you can, then please send it to me "with all writing"! The second mistake was that Jesus never said anything about group worship and singing God's praises, as we have seen, so the leader was effectively using Paul to undermine Jesus.

What does the passage in Ephesians mean then, if it is not an encouragement to group worship?

It means just what it says. Christian worship is not an activity but an attitude. Let your heart bubble over with God's praises!

I find it terribly hard to imagine a church without group worship.

Yes – so do I. I think that is because we have been reared in a country containing fifty thousand buildings erected for group worship which are known as churches. That has a very strong pull! I imagine it must have been equally hard believing the world was round when everyone thought it was flat, or that the earth went round the sun when everyone believed the sun went round the earth. What it shows is that while many of us would like to think we form our Christian beliefs from the Bible, we actually tend to form them from what we see around us. Our view of the church has been absorbed from our culture.

But the Psalms are full of worship!

There are several things to be said here. Firstly, the Psalms predate Jesus by hundreds of years, so a case needs to be made as to why the Church that he founded should be influenced by exhortations to worship in the Psalms. Why pick on that aspect in particular out of the whole Old Testament? Why take the church's agenda from the

Old Testament at all? Secondly, note that some of the Psalmist's exhortations to praise God appeal for integrity of life in the worshippers, for example "Praise befits the upright!" and "O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness." Where was the holiness in those days if the people ignored God's instructions, which sadly they did for the most part? The idea of worship divorced from upright holy living which we have identified as a problem today is foreign to the Psalms as well. Don't imagine that appealing to the Psalms somehow lessens the need for the Church to obey Jesus' instructions. Thirdly, the Psalms were used in the Temple in Jerusalem, it seems, so only a fraction of the nation could be present. We should not imagine the bulk of the people of those days attending weekly worship in a local building; that is to impose our culture on theirs incorrectly.

I personally value the Psalms enormously, but I can't accept that their exhortations to praise the Lord have a controlling say in how the church of Jesus should operate.

I thought the Church was meant to follow on from the synagogue.

I have heard that idea more than once, but you won't find it in the Gospels. The Book of Revelation is so rude about synagogues that I once heard it described as being an anti-semitic book! Not much support for the idea there. Whoever first attempted to model churches on synagogues had no right to do so, in my opinion. But for the sake of argument, suppose you are right, and we should be continuing the synagogue tradition. If so, how is it that in my five years at Theological College, the practice and style of synagogues in Jesus' day was never raised once? I believe that in synagogues, men and women sat in different parts of the building. How many churches in the UK do you know that separate men and women in their meetings like that, in an attempt to follow the synagogue tradition? If we are trying to follow on from synagogues, we are making a very poor shot at it indeed!

Are you sure that the word "in" in Ephesians should not have been translated "with all"?

Quite sure!

But I thought that the Bible was full of mis-translations.

Your view is much too negative. Translation from one language to another can be a difficult undertaking, especially if the cultures are different. I read recently that Arabic has forty different words for camel! Or take the verse in Job which I once heard described as the translator's nightmare, where the speaker mentions four different words for lion in one verse. In English, we have many words for different breeds of dog that other cultures might find confusing, leading to difficulties in translation.

Another difficulty for translators from dead languages, like Biblical Hebrew and Greek, is that some words come so rarely that we are not sure what they mean. This makes some passages obscure. However, the huge bulk of the Bible text is unaffected by these problems. In particular, Jesus spoke in everyday language and used simple concepts that people could understand. His words are not that difficult to translate.

Tell me more about the cultural differences causing a problem for translators.

Here is an example. Jesus once said, “If your eye is single, then your whole body will be full of light.” We ask, what does he mean by your eye being single? One suggestion is that this phrase at the time had to do with giving to the poor. If this is so, then we can understand Jesus’ words as an appeal to be generous. Whether or not that is the case, you can see that a knowledge of the ways and customs of Jesus’ own time will help us in understanding what he taught. There is a place for good scholarship here.

Could the original Bible text have been altered?

Yes it could. I can think of several ways. Before printing was invented, copies had to be made by hand. The copyists could have introduced errors by mistake. Again, original manuscripts could have become defaced, and then copyists would have needed to guess at the original, and might have guessed wrongly. Other copyists might have changed the text deliberately. This is another area for the scholars.

Any examples?

Jesus once said that his followers were to give in secret, “and your heavenly father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” At least, that’s what the early manuscripts say. However, many later manuscripts add the word “openly”, at the end of the sentence. This alters the sense completely! The different readings raise questions about which was most likely to have been the original reading, giving more scope for scholars.

Explain the bit about early and late manuscripts.

As I understand it, several thousand New Testament texts from the centuries following Jesus have been discovered. These range in size from entire New Testaments down to little scraps of parchment with only a few words on. No two of them agree one hundred percent! But the degree of overlap is high. An indication of the amount of work that has been done by scholars is that my Greek New Testament, which I bought in 1981, is based on the twenty-sixth edition of the Nestle-Aland text!

In preparing the text from the originals, judgements had to be made about the date of each manuscript found. While an early manuscript would command respect in that copyists would have had less time to corrupt the text, it is also possible that a late manuscript showing a seeming variant might be a good copy of an early text now lost, so it should not be dismissed out of hand.

It sounds like a most fascinating study.

Yes; I would recommend it for anyone who enjoys brain-teasers but has become tired of doing complex jigsaw puzzles, and no longer finds the hardest crossword puzzles stretching! It is all very well working from photocopies or scanned images of the manuscripts, but you would never be quite sure whether a tiny mark was present in the manuscript or was a blemish introduced during the copying. So ideally, you would need to travel through the world visiting the libraries where the documents are housed to look at them first hand. You would be wise to have a good training in how to handle and read old manuscripts in place, not to mention a thorough grasp of both New Testament and classical Greek. In addition, you would need to be able to infer

things from the handwriting, and you would require an extensive knowledge of other Greek literature of the time. Have fun!

All this begins to make the New Testament text we have inherited sound unreliable to me.

Not a bit of it. Despite all these caveats, and following many decades of hard work, it is claimed by those who know that our text is rugged and reliable – well over 95% accurate as compared with the original.

But how do we know that it was even recorded accurately in the first place? Perhaps it was handed down by word of mouth before being written down?

Maybe it was passed on orally to begin with. Need that present a problem in a culture before printing was invented that relied on oral transmission?

That could depend on how many people there were in the chain before it was committed to writing.

That's right. As a result, the dating of the manuscripts that we have becomes important. The good news is that the earliest copies are close enough to the events to mean that the gap before writing cannot be that large. Also, don't forget that the idea of written scriptures was already current in what we call the Old Testament documents, so the incentive to commit the material to writing would have been strong. Finally, much of the New Testament consists of letters, which by definition were composed in written form.

I once heard a talk which implied that as the Gospels were the creation of the early church, their contents did not necessarily match what had happened. Maybe things were put into the gospels because they were the concerns of a later age?

This view is the tip of the iceberg. Many theories have been proposed about the composition of the gospels, some of which in effect undermine the gospels as a reliable source of information about Jesus and his teaching. My own area of study was the Book of Judges, so I cannot comment with authority on the precise issues that have been raised by scholars with regard to the gospels. Over a five year period of research, I looked at around a thousand books and articles relating to the book of Judges. At the end, I decided that despite all the many theories and ideas I had come across, nobody had come up with a compelling reason as to why the text should not be taken at its face value. On the assumption that the same would have happened if I had been involved in research in the gospels, I feel comfortable saying this: on reading a statement in the gospels like "Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world'", there is no reason why you should not understand from it that Jesus said I am the light of the world.

Let me make the point another way. It seems to me that the burden of proof lies with those who wish to say that the gospel record is unreliable, not with those who accept it on its own terms, that it is what it claims to be. Let the detractors prove their case. To my mind, no one has yet done so. Those of us who wish to accept what we

read in a straightforward manner need feel no sense that we are being somehow unscholarly.

That is all very well, but I thought that archaeology had disproved some parts of the Bible.

There is a fallacy in your statement. Archaeology is the study of ancient remains. Every find is a piece of evidence, which has to be interpreted. Therefore, the most anyone can ever say is "Some archaeologists have suggested from their finds that..." In the field of archaeology, proof is by definition impossible. Archaeology can never prove or disprove anything. Further, the tendency is that for every claim by one school of thought, there is a counter claim by another.

I think you are side-stepping the issue. Have archaeologists not suggested areas where the text may be faulty, based on their researches?

Yes, they have. But only a small part of the Bible text has been brought into question in this way. It is not a major problem.

You make the process of enquiry into the biblical record sound much less certain than some books I have seen. I recall phrases like "doubtless", and "it has been shown that", and the like, as if these were established facts.

I am afraid that the field of biblical studies has sometimes suffered from over-confidence. Reflect for a moment. We are dealing with a field of enquiry two thousand years distant from our own culture, in a part of the world which is not home for most biblical scholars, involving dead languages which are never the primary language of scholars, and archaeological remains in a land which has seen many waves of immigration and much bloodshed since. How can anybody use words like doubtless in such an enquiry without incurring the charge of being over certain?

Personally, I think that biblical scholars taken as a whole should spend more time reflecting on crime novels, whose message is that when it comes to interpreting evidence, things are not always quite as straightforward as they might appear. Some of us need to have more humility when talking about the New Testament era.

In my opinion, there is no convincing case for distrusting the biblical text that we have.

I wonder why there has been so much distrust of the Biblical text. What do you think?

One point which emerges from all the discussion of the Bible text is that when all is said and done, there are two groups of people. People who hold that the text is corrupt in some way, or that we understand more than the New Testament writers did and so have a more enlightened view than them, are passing judgement on the text in some way or other. But for others, the text stands supreme, and where our world view and that of the New Testament clash, the New Testament world view is to be preferred. At the end of the day, you can either aim to put yourself under the authority of the New Testament, or you can regard your opinion as being superior to that of the New Testament. Most opinions about the Bible text can be seen to fall into one of these two camps.

As I understand it, you favour the latter position.

That's right. For me, following Jesus means discovering his outlook, his aims, his teaching and his will from the Gospels, and adopting them. The argument of this book is that there is no other way of following Jesus than doing just that. Indeed, you could sum up my whole presentation as an appeal to people to take the teaching of Jesus seriously.

Thank you – that's very helpful. It has been stated in literary circles that there is no one meaning of any text, as different people will understand different things from the same piece of writing. How do you respond to that, with regard to the Bible?

Taken to its logical conclusion, this view renders written communication impossible, it seems to me. A valid insight, that different readers will have different responses to a text, is being taken to an unreasonable conclusion. What is more, the statement denying a universal meaning to a text is self-defeating, as if it is true, different readers will draw different meanings from the statement itself.

Let's not tie ourselves up in unnecessary knots. It seems to me that the difficulty lies not in understanding what we are called to do, but in doing it. Let us quietly aim to carry out the challenge presented to us.

How can I learn to cast out demons and heal the sick?

Read the gospels and see what Jesus did! There are also passages in Acts where the first disciples healed and delivered people too. There are recent books on these subjects as well, but you will need to be careful that their aim really is to clarify and explain what Jesus taught. Be ready to accept some parts and reject others. Be cautious of practice which does not fit the gospel pattern.

In learning how to cast out demons, I found the book *Christian Set Yourself Free* helpful. Not only is the authors' story inspiring, but I could learn how to cast out demons by practising on myself before starting on others.

But what about the prompting of God which you mention in one place.

Yes, well spotted. The test of anything of this kind is whether it can be squared with the Gospels. If it runs counter, then reject it. If it passes that test, always remember that what we might call an insight from God can never have the same status as a recorded instruction of Jesus. Be ready to admit that you got something wrong.