

Black, Bendy Bibles and Social Action

Why conservative Protestantism obsesses about saving the souls of the poor yet doesn't appear to give a rat's ... about why they're poor in the first place.

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Readings: Rev 20:1-6, Mat. 24:3-8, 19-22, Luke 4:18-19

Introduction

If you've seen the title of the sermon in Didjano you'll know it has something vaguely to do with the Bible, and something about social action. It's true: I do want to talk about both those things. You can relax though: this is not going to be a scholarly treatment of any particular doctrine, though I do want to get serious about the Bible, and reflect on its importance in our lives. Why? Because a) it's been a long time since I did any serious Bible study and b) my journey has taken me through a lot of twists and turns and I think I need to revisit this particular way of understanding grace.

Like all my sermons, this is therapy for me. So I'll own it for myself. Anything critical, harsh or unreasonable I say applies to me, first and foremost. The value in being part of a loving community is a) I get to bounce my journey off of you, b) you get to tell me where to get off and c) hopefully God will intervene and we'll all be better off for it.

Before you roll your eyes and think "Paul's read another book", I was actually inspired by a video we viewed at home group one evening; about prophecy of all things. It was like old times for me; all those arguments I used to have with my father. But it also got me reflecting that the way in which you view the end times makes a drastic difference in how you see the world and what we should be doing about it as Christians - more on that later.

First though, I'd like to share something of my own journey with the Bible, and then explore what the connection is between the end times and social justice. Maybe I can justify the subtitle of the sermon - why Protestant Christianity seems obsessed with the souls of the poor while it seemingly ignores what makes them poor in the first place. I know that sounds a little harsh, but I deliberately worded it that way. What I'm describing is a perception I've experienced myself and heard from other Christians in the social justice area. Is it true, do you think?

A biblical travelogue

I was brought up, and came to faith in, a conservative and loving Baptist church in the 1970s. Bible study was regarded as a high priority and we attended mid-week studies regularly. The way we interpreted and applied Scripture was characterised by three particular doctrines.

First was the notion of Biblical inerrancy. Every word in the Bible is inspired by God, and is to be taken literally. Creation is a literal seven days. And we should expect to find which thousand hills he owns the cattle on if we want (Psalm 50). It's also been my experience that churches that emphasise Inerrancy also tend to have a particular way of reading Scripture – their way. There is often a strong encouragement to conform, especially if you want to stay part of the group.

A second significant doctrine was a premillennial / dispensationalist view of the end times – more on that later.

Third was a largely *Arminian* view of salvation. Two planks of this doctrine are that a) we choose to accept Jesus through our own free will (not through compulsion or predestination), and b) we can lose that salvation through our own choices.

That doctrinal cocktail left us with an expectation that Jesus' return was imminent, a compulsion to go out and save the lost, and an imperative to keep within the church and follow standard Baptist teaching. When I moved to Western Australia it was no different, and still isn't today, though there are a wide variety of views out there. Even so, I still hear of churches where if you stray too far from the path you're regarded as a heretic, a backslider or just a loser.

And backslide I did (in some ways it was the best fun I'd had in years) until I joined the West Leederville community (the predecessor of MHCC) in 1979. WL was my first introduction to Reformed Theology, and it put the cat among the pigeons. Central to reformed theology is a Calvinist view of salvation, which stresses that God determines who gets in to the Kingdom and who doesn't (and for some extremists in tones that remind me of John Howard's refugee policy). We don't have enough free will to make the hard choices. On the positive side, once you're saved, you're always saved. My dad used to love that even though he was a Baptist.

While WL was moderate and tolerant of different views, the wider denomination was conservative and reactionary. This was the place for good argument. Despite that, I later came to see there wasn't just one "right" way to interpret Scripture. In fact there were a multiplicity of ways, all earnestly advocated by sincere, if somewhat fanatical, people. I needed to "make up my own mind".

I hope by now you can see this stuff was important to me. I guess I was one of the odd balls who took an interest in that kind of thing. On the other hand I suspect most people don't know or don't care how you spell Arminianism (as opposed to Armenianism, which is the practice of living in Armenia and dodging falling buildings).

As it happened, I was privileged to be taught and mentored by the minister at WL. He was passionate in expounding what the Bible says about the poor, *and* the way in which the principalities and powers of this world influence governments and power structures around the globe. He also talked a lot about the Kingdom of God and the role of Jesus as the fulfilment of God's purposes in history (see, it's all coming back to me).

Yet, despite all that, after absorbing a lifetime of theology, countless Bible studies from a young age (I'd read the Bible from cover to cover twice before I was twenty), endless arguments about this and that, I came to the point where, frankly, I was bored. So were no more Bible studies, no more theological conversations. I was pretty familiar with the broad thrust of Biblical history; I could get by. Then I got sick, but that's another story. How did it come to this? Here are some possibilities.

Too much of a good thing

There is such a thing as too much Bible study. You can't study the Bible in a vacuum. You have to get out there and smell the flowers, feel the dirt, look at people and learn a thing or two about civilisation. Knowledge just isn't enough. Without a true experience of relationship with the Creator, the Bible is just words on paper, other peoples' stories, not my own.

It's easy to deceive ourselves about what we think we know, and we can become guilty of the greatest arrogance and judgementalism, without even realizing it. When we use language like "this is a Bible-believing church", isn't there a covert message that other churches aren't? When we say "*this* is what the Bible says", or "*this* is the truth", we are in danger of ignoring the fact that we are applying our interpretation, despite how well informed it is.

It's like looking through a hidden lens (be it cultural, biological or otherwise). Everything we see is distorted by the act of looking. It is simply impossible for us to be 100% correct or objective (and this includes Biblical translators, commentators and theologians). But I'd go further than that. Jeremiah 17:9-10 says "...the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. I, the Lord, search the heart and examine the mind...". We can probably never know all our hidden lenses, much less quantify how they affect our judgment.

So we need to be humble. While maturity can bring us to a much deeper understanding of some of our biases, we always have to allow for the possibility we could be wrong. This is not to downgrade our intellect, but to put it in its proper place. Nor is it to say we can never believe anything with

confidence or there is no such thing as the “truth”, but merely to say no-one ever has, or can ever know, the whole truth. Remember the six wise men and the elephant?

We also need to be aware of the power of God’s Spirit to speak to us in amazing ways. There has been more than one occasion where I have come to a view that was contradictory to my reading of Scripture (eg my view on the role of women in the Church), and that only years later as my understanding improved I realised I had been reading it “wrong” in the first place. I believe the Spirit was teaching me something before I was even aware of it. It takes a great deal of humility and practice to find a balance between trusting our intellect, our emotions and what we perceive as the voice of the Spirit.

As a digression, one of the other competing influences on how we interpret Scripture is our human need for stability. We are inherently insecure creatures. We need a minimum level of certainty to function properly. So we have a tendency to accept things at face value, and to simplify, as a way of coping with a complex and sometimes overwhelming world. Our treatment of Scripture is no exception. We let other people do our thinking for us. We sometimes adopt the prevailing theology of whatever group we belong to for the sake of membership. It’s understandable, but it’s dangerous.

And so back to now. I have to confess one thing I’ve observed: I don’t think it’s just me. Maybe I’m looking in the wrong places, but with one or two obvious exceptions, I don’t see a lot of serious, or even regular, Biblical study in our church. I hope I’m wrong and I’m interested to hear your feedback. But hey, what would I know; I’m only the piano player.

For those of us in this community that have a strong commitment to social justice this issue is not one we can ignore. As advocates for God’s justice on Earth, it’s vital we have a solid theological basis. As an example, let’s come back to that video I was talking about before and explore it in a bit more detail.

The importance of eschatology

As I said before, eschatology is the study of the last things, ie what’s going to happen in the future. Most Christians agree Jesus will come back one day, but some groups are quite obsessive in scouring the Bible for hints and clues about God’s return. While there are some things most people agree about, a lot differ on when, and in what order, things occur and what we mean by judgement, hell, heaven, and so on.

I used to enjoy a good stoush on this topic, but like my approach to the Bible in general, I gradually came to view it as irrelevant and boring. It’s actually really important, and the Bible does say a number of things about the future.

Historically there have been a plethora of views on how to interpret what Scripture says about the future. I only want to look at two of the most popular views held today, and even then on scantily, just to prove a point. Those two views are Amillennialism and Dispensational Premillennialism. Very briefly, they go something like this:

The Bible readings we had today talk of Jesus returning to a long, thousand-year period when he would be in charge of the world. People refer to that as the Millennial period. Preceding that time most people believe there will be a great tribulation. But what does it all mean?

Amillennialism (AM) holds that that Great Tribulation equates to the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. They believe that Jesus’ Kingdom was inaugurated, and Satan bound, both at the cross, though we see the evidence for this only in part. The Kingdom will come in its fullness when Jesus returns at the end of time. While Satan is bound, he still has influence on the planet. At the end of a long period Satan will be let loose for a little while. Then there will be a final confrontation, judgement, then heaven. Amillennialists don’t actually have any specific 1000-year period in mind, just recognition of a long period where we see the Kingdom in part, and look in anticipation for Christ’s return.

Because we’re placed *in* that millennial period there are implications for how we live on earth, particularly if we have a concern for social justice. The Kingdom of God, which Jesus describes as a

Kingdom of justice, is with us now, not in some future time! When Jesus prays “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mat 6:9ff), he means let the values of God’s kingdom happen now. In Jesus’ first sermon in the synagogue, not long after his Temptation in the desert, he says “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor...” (Luke 4:18ff). This passage takes on a particular significance if you interpret it in the context of God’s kingdom being revealed to us now. It has not just a spiritual, personal meaning but ramifications for society as well. It inevitably leads Christians to engage with political issues, because injustice is often perpetrated politically. And solutions to the problems of injustice often involve fixing unjust laws.

Who takes this particular view of the end times? The Roman Catholic church, reformed churches following the Westminster Confession, and many, many social activist Christians. It’s been around a long time, since at least Augustine.

Dispensational Premillennialism (PRM) is a different can of worms. While AM puts us *in* the millennium, premillennialism puts it into the future. Most PRMers are looking for wars and rumours of wars as signs of Scripture about to be fulfilled. The Rapture, that time when God’s people are taken up into heaven to meet Jesus, will happen soon, followed by the Great Tribulation which will last exactly seven years, then Jesus will come back and establish his kingdom for exactly 1000 years, then a brief release of Satan at the end, followed by the final judgement.

How is that different? Well, it puts God’s justice into the future. The Kingdom of God is not for now; it’s for later. When passages talk about the poor, they mean poor in Spirit. The Sermon on the Mount doesn’t apply to us now. When Jesus talks about fighting injustice, he means establishing spiritual justice. That means there is no necessity to engage in politics to fight issues of injustice, though there are a number of moral issues worth taking the cudgels up for. What’s more, if the Rapture is imminent then we have little time. We need to focus on getting as many people into the Kingdom as possible, before it’s too late. Does any of this sound familiar?

How common is premillennialism? As it happens there is a multi-million dollar prophecy industry that capitalises on PRM, particularly in the US. Here are three examples:

- *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey: the New York Times described the book as the '#1 Non-fiction Bestseller of the Decade.' By 1993 it had gone through more than 108 printings, with more than 18 million copies in English, and estimates varying between 18-20 million further copies in 54 foreign languages.
- The *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. From the point of view of literature, it’s Jacquie Collins meets George Pell. But, 20,000,00 million copies of the first book have sold since 1995; and 40,000,000 in the whole series.
- A Thief In The Night¹: Made in 1973, I read somewhere there have been 6 million estimated conversions from this film alone.

And yet, Dispensational PRM, as it’s popularly expounded, has only been around for a relatively short time, since the early 1800s, thanks largely to John Darby, a Plymouth Brethren member.

¹ When I was in my teens at a church camp they screened a film that, to this day, is still the scariest film I’ve ever seen. A woman in bed wakes to the sound of her husband mowing the lawn. As she looks out the window she sees the mower without a pusher. It transpires that the saints have been raptured up into heaven, and the story revolves around those left behind to suffer through the Great Tribulation. The film’s punch line comes right at the end when the woman wakes up thinking it has all been a dream. She hears the sound of her husband shaving and, on rising, sees the running shaver on the basin; no beard, no husband, The End. We quietly shuffled out. As I went back to my dorm to jokes with my friends I couldn’t find any of them. I finally settled in my own bunk afraid, alone and terrified. Part of that boy is still here today. The film, of course, was a Thief In The Night.

Which groups support PRM? Certainly a large proportion of Pentecostal, Charismatic churches and Seventh Day Adventist churches, but also a large number of Baptist and Churches of Christ; in other words, where most of the church growth is.

Why is all this important? Because if the millennium really is in the future, if God's call for justice is for a later period than those of us who are passionate about bringing justice to the world are wasting our time – we should get a different day job. We *should* be focussing on saving souls. We should be doing our darnedest to spread the message before it's too late. It's a luxury to think in the long term, of building friendships that don't lead to salvation. What's more important is to Preach the Word, fulfil the Great Commission and get on the next missionary boat to China. It doesn't take blind Freddy to realise this is exactly what much of protestant Christianity is about today.

It hasn't always been like this. Even as late as the 19th Century, evangelism and social action were part and parcel of what it meant to be Christian. Think about Lord Wilberforce and the abolition of the slave trade. It's only recently that there has been a separation between evangelism and social activism.

It is largely through from an Amillennialist perspective that I see God as absolutely and fundamentally concerned with redeeming the whole of creation to himself. That includes people, but it also includes the power structures that rule the planet, and it certainly includes the physical environment. So where there are inequities, God's Kingdom is about reversing them. Because of that, God is fundamentally concerned for the wellbeing of the poor and underprivileged, not because they are essentially better than the rich, but because he is for equity, for balancing crooked scales. His Kingdom is a holistic one that affects our physical, social and spiritual lives, and our job is to promote and extend his Kingdom, even though we will only see this in part before his coming. We should therefore not see people as objects of salvation alone, but as subjects of God's love. This will invariably lead us to love people who may show no interest in entering God's kingdom, or even acknowledging God (cf Luke 17: 11-17). It will invariably lead us to examine the causes of poverty rather than blindly treating the symptoms.

It's outrageous really – God redeeming the whole planet, Governments, plants, animals as well as people? But don't take my word for it. I don't expect anyone to believe a word I'm saying without checking it out for themselves. That's why it is so important we all study the Bible to the best of our ability, all the more if we are in a front-line role promoting the reality of the Kingdom.

Just in case you think I'm being hard on the conservatives, sometimes Christian activists are just as Biblically uninformed as the ones they criticize, and I've been no exception. The truth is, there are many Christians with whom I may have a profound theological disagreement, who do engage holistically in the world, and just get on with the job, people who follow their hearts while at odds with their peer group.. Sometimes I've accused conservative Christians of shallowness. I now see this as rather offensive and arrogant on my part. The real problem, in my view, is not lack of sincerity - it is bad theology.

But lets be realistic: 40,000,000 copies of Left Behind are going to leave a lot of people buried in Daniel and Revelation and checking their lawnmowers and shavers regularly to make sure someone is attached to them.

So, all we have to do is get our theology straight and everything else will follow suit. If only it were this simple. It's often the other way around. Sometimes people find a theology to suit their worldview. Some people are drawn to PRM because they're afraid. PRM gives easy out with the Rapture and puts all that difficult political stuff into the future. But Christian activists can be guilty of the same thing. If I'm angry at the world it's not hard to see me exaggerating the issue and looking to Scripture to justify my views. This is why it is so important to try and put our baggage to one side and have a look at what the Bible says, as honestly and thoughtfully as we can.

Conclusions

So where has this led me to? After a lot of waffling and arguing, I've learned to have a cautious respect for my intellect. I've learnt a lot about God's grace in the face of my character flaws. But now I find myself on the next leg of the journey, one where intellect meets experience. I find myself stirring with a new interest in the beginnings, in the roots of my faith. I find that I am learning things as if for the first time about God, about who Jesus is.

And, as with all my other passions, I can't do this alone. I need to have other people who share the same passion, and recognise the same pitfalls. So I'm inviting those of us who are committed to the Kingdom, but who feel jaded, or lacking in knowledge, or whatever, to read this book, to study it, to see what journey it will take us on, and who we might meet on the way.

Three final points: Firstly, I am amazed at the capacity of untrained people to extract the most powerful revelations of God from Scripture, even *without* the aid of commentaries or gurus – we often underestimate the ability of the Spirit to bring to light passages that are shrouded in history and mystery. We don't have to be brilliant academics. And those of us who have done serious Biblical study should not rest on our laurels. We have a responsibility to encourage those around us.

Secondly, a word about life experience versus Biblical study: People sometimes talk as if Bible study is superior to experience. This is a false dichotomy. The Bible is no less than the written-down, shared, collective experiences of God meeting man. God continually speaks to us through life's impasses (as Brian Stitt mentioned recently). On the other hand, we need to make sense of those Biblical stories. So we organise them into abstract concepts about God. It can be helpful to do that, so long as we remember: God is always larger than our abstractions. He is always extending our theology. Always.

And finally, there's one other dimension to Scripture I haven't mentioned yet. That is the role of the Spirit in transforming the Scriptures into God's special revelation about himself. It is the Spirit who takes these old documents and transforms them in to the most amazing story of all time. They are the primary source for understanding God purposes in history, and are good for shaping the way we understand God, and the way we live. It is a unique book that shares, first-hand, of God's redemption of mankind through Jesus. There is no substitute for the Bible. Without the Bible we cannot understand what it means to be a Christian.

And so to my original question: do the conservatives care? Of course they do, deeply. But often about the wrong things. In the meantime, it's more important that I get on with the job and put my money where my mouth is.

So let me encourage you to consider the Bible as God's story becoming ours, as one of the strongest and most profound ways of helping us walk through the valley, through the political and environmental minefields, through our Dark night of the Soul, through to the big one when he returns.

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