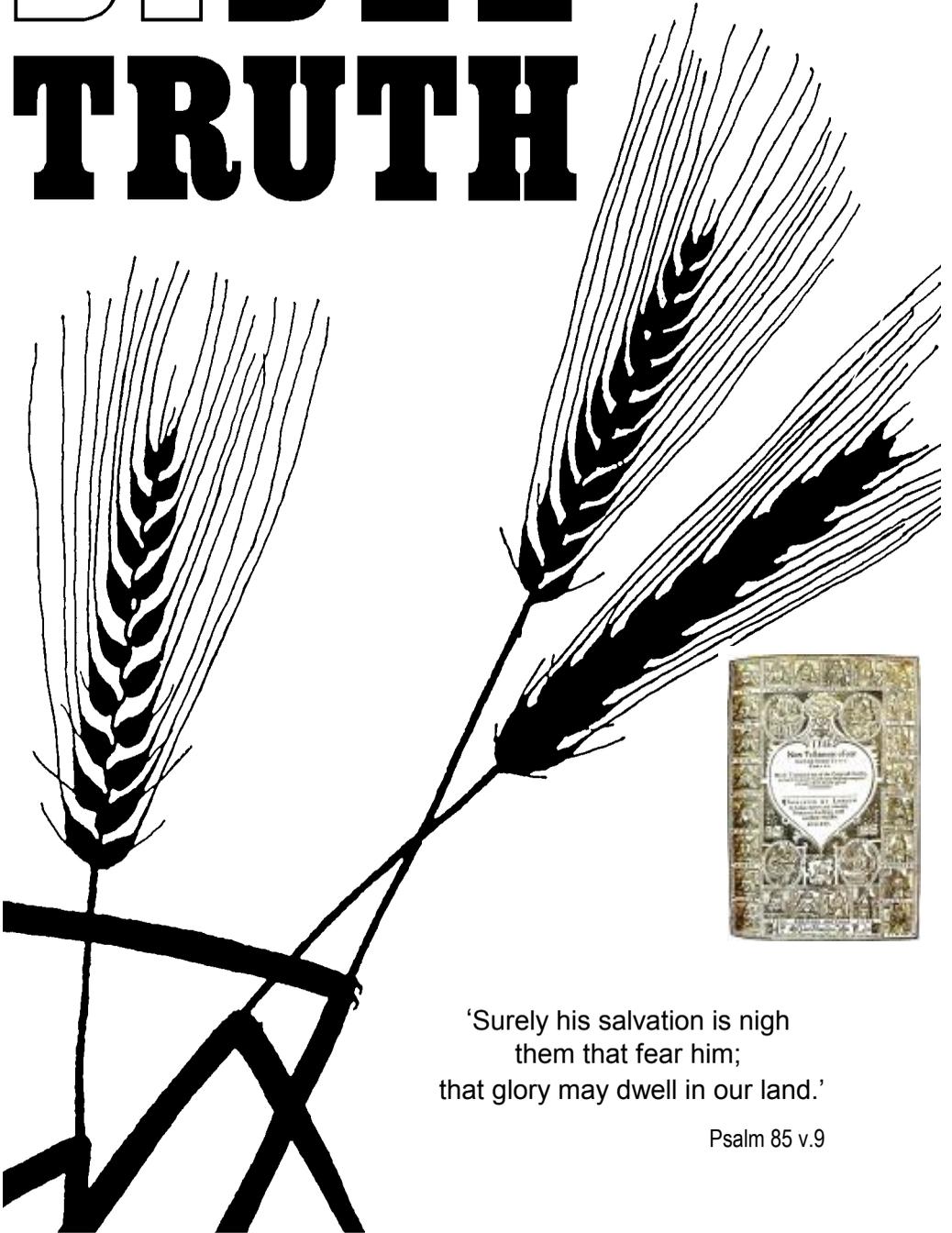


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‘Surely his salvation is nigh
them that fear him;
that glory may dwell in our land.’

Psalm 85 v.9

LIBERAL THEOLOGY AND THE TRUTH OF THE BIBLE

by Jonathan Willans

The results of the nation-wide Church Survey '*Let the People Speak*' published in 2005 revealed that many congregations want Bible based sermons and teaching. They want to know what the Bible itself states and proper guidance on how to apply its teaching to their individual lives. This explains the popularity of courses such as 'Alpha' and 'Christianity Explored' and ordinary Bible study groups.

The Survey also revealed the dismay of many that 'the church' in the UK often failed to stand up for Biblical morality and that some ministers amazingly didn't believe in such things as the Virgin Birth, the Bodily Resurrection of Christ or His Second Coming. Again many were dismayed that some clergy approved of immoral behaviour which is repeatedly forbidden in the Word of God.

Probably the most frequently asked question by many new Christians is 'how can someone be a minister and not believe in and accept the plain teaching of the Bible?'

The purpose of this article is to answer that question in a simple manner and place the present position of the UK churches in their proper world context.

The idea of spiritualising things away in Scripture, rather than taking them factually or treating the Bible as merely an unreliable collection of sayings, is not a modern concept. Liberal theology as it has come to be called was around during the time of Our Lord and it is interesting to read how Jesus responded to this concept.

The liberal theologians in the time of Jesus were of course the Sadducees. They thought that the stories and teachings of the Old Testament were untrustworthy and often needed to be 'spiritualised' rather than taken literally. This view, for example, led them to reject the idea of an afterlife and the existence of angels. (See Acts ch.23 v.8 & Matthew ch.22 v.23). The existence of an afterlife, the promise of future rewards for the righteous and future punishments for the unrepentant, as well as the existence of good and bad angels are all plainly taught in the Old Testament. The Sadducees however thought that passages of Scripture which taught these things should be regarded figuratively rather than literally and spiritualised away their meaning.

In Matthew ch.22 vv 23-32 a very revealing exchange took place between these liberal theologians and Our Lord. The Sadducees aimed to show that believing in an afterlife would bring all sorts of problems and gave the example of a woman who had been married to seven brothers. '... in the resurrection whose wife shall she be of the seven? for they all had her.'

Before answering their specific question Jesus makes a very significant twofold comment about their theological stand point. First of all He rebukes them for '... not knowing the scriptures, ...' and then secondly for not accepting '... the power of God'. In other words they didn't understand what Scripture actually taught and they doubted God's power to have done such things in the first place.

Although Jesus condemned their view and position on Scripture, this notion of spiritualising events and regarding the Bible as being unreliable never fully disappeared. The theory came to prominence again in the theological colleges of Germany in the late 19th century then it gradually filtered into the theological colleges in Britain in the early 20th century. This liberal attitude towards Scripture gradually weakened the beliefs and morality of many in Germany and in part explains why Nazism found fertile ground in the resulting spiritual vacuum. It also explains why (with notable exceptions) the response of the German churches to Hitler was so muted.

Today, church ministers in Britain (of whatever denomination) can generally be divided into two main groups. One group follows the traditional view that what is written in Scripture is a Divinely Inspired accurate summary of God's dealings with the human race and is to be accepted at face value. According to this view for example, because it plainly records that Jesus was born of a virgin and bodily rose from the dead etc., this is exactly what happened and this is actually what it means.

The other group rejects this notion of taking the Bible literally and believes that what is written is unreliable and often needs to be taken in a figurative or symbolic sense. According to this view, for example, they might suggest that Jesus wasn't literally born of a virgin and that it is recorded as such only to get across the idea that He was in some way a special and unique person. Then again, perhaps the writers really believed in a Virgin Birth but were misguided in this idea. Or again, regarding sexual practices clearly and repeatedly forbidden in Scripture they might take the view that such passages only referred to the people of that particular time, rather than people today, thinking that some of these moral laws were 'culturally determined'.

At the moment, clergy who belong to this second group are so many in number in the UK that churches elsewhere in the world, such as Africa and Asia, often regard British Christianity as being in a state of moral and spiritual meltdown. They feel that many have departed from '... the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.' (Jude v.3), and that the spiritually 'lukewarm' condition of many UK churches can be likened to the 'Laodicean church' which is described in Revelation ch.3 vv 14-19.

This also explains why UK clergy often give a muted or divided response on matters of belief, doctrine and moral behaviour. The Church Survey revealed that congregations rarely hear sermons defending and explaining the fundamental teachings of Christianity. Rarely is it explained what the Bible teaches about the need for personal salvation, the promise of the Second Coming of Christ, and the strict moral standards God requires us to uphold in our personal lives. There is almost complete silence concerning the terrifying judgement Jesus came to save us from, the fact that we are all sinners needing salvation and the truth that some day every one of us will stand before the Judgement Throne of Christ. For this reason, an increasing number of African Christians are coming over to the UK acting as missionaries. They come because they feel that British Christianity needs to be restored to its former beliefs in order to avert a spiritual catastrophe on a national scale.

Those who do not believe that the events and teachings of Scripture are accurate and who reject the idea that they were written by individuals specially inspired by the Holy Spirit for that particular purpose, have yet to adequately answer two profound questions.

First, if the Bible really is unreliable why then are the prophecies of Scripture being accurately fulfilled ?

The idea that the Bible should be treated in the same sceptical manner as any other ancient book contradicts the fact that it is totally different from other ancient writings. The Bible is unique amongst ancient literature because one third of it is composed of prophecy and predictions. No other ancient or modern work is similar.

Many of these prophecies have already come to pass even though they were written hundreds and in some cases thousands of years before the events they foretold. Such accurate predictions are a sign of Divine inspiration rather than mere human thought. Faultlessly predicting events which are to happen hundreds of years in the future is utterly impossible for the human mind unless it is being influenced by the Holy Spirit.

Liberal theologians ignore these signs of inspiration by intimating these prophecies were written after their fulfilment. The error of this view however is easily exposed by examining prophecy that has been fulfilled in modern times. Take for instance, the Biblical prediction that Jerusalem would be liberated in 1917 and that after their world-wide dispersal the Jews would re-establish themselves as a nation. As the article 'Amazing Prophecy Fulfilled' points out, the exact year of liberation was predicted long ago in the Books of Leviticus and Daniel and the method of liberation was actually described by Isaiah when he described something similar to birds flying over the city (Isaiah ch.31 v.5). These turned out to be General Allenby's planes.

Or what about the prophecy concerning the invention of weapons of mass destruction? In Matthew ch.24 v.22 Jesus predicted that a time would come when human beings would have the capability to destroy all life on the planet. This prophecy has been part of the text of Scripture for 2000 years, not just added a few decades ago after the event came to pass with the invention of nuclear weapons. (See my articles on 'Israel and Middle East in Prophecy' for numerous other examples - www.internetpulpit.co.uk).

Second, treating things as being unreliable or merely figurative in Scripture raises the profound question; If God did not mean exactly what He says in Scripture then why didn't He say what He really meant?

The liberal theory of spiritualising the events and teachings in Scripture by regarding them as merely symbolic raises an unanswerable question. If God really doesn't want us to take events which are clearly recorded as being literal, as literal, then why doesn't Scripture say as much? If God doesn't want us to regard certain sexual and moral commandments as being for all time but just for a particular age and culture, then why doesn't Scripture make that clear? And if God really doesn't want us to view the prophecies He gave as having a literal fulfilment (such as His promise of the restoration of the Jewish nation which has now literally come to pass, the Second Coming of Christ, the Battle of Armageddon and the Day of Judgement) then why doesn't He say so? Put simply, if God doesn't mean exactly what He says in Scripture then why didn't He say just what He really meant?

Scripture clearly teaches that Jesus was born of a Virgin and bodily rose from the dead. For some liberal theologians to interpret these events symbolically rather than literally, arguing that they are merely literary techniques to say that His life was special, raises the

question; why didn't the Bible truthfully record what really happened and explain that He was nonetheless special?

Liberal theology brings total confusion. What does one take as factual? What does one regard as symbolic? What is sinful? What is permissible? How can we know what sexual and moral standards God wants us to maintain if it is not made plain? What has God done in the past with the human race? What does He intend to do in the future with us? What is God really like in character? What doctrines are we to believe?

All these questions reveal why God gave us Scripture in the first place. In order for us to know the answers it was necessary to provide humanity with a Divinely Inspired accurate 'instruction manual'. This is exactly what we have in the Bible which proves its authenticity and Divine Authorship by having a third of it deliberately written in the form of prophecy and predictions. As these prophecies get fulfilled one by one they provide a continuous witness and sign to each new generation of the trustworthiness and truthfulness of the Word of God.

Scripture repeatedly refers to its miraculous origin as this example taken from 2 Timothy ch.3 v.16 shows.

'All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.'

& 2 Peter ch.1 vv 20-21,

'... no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. ... but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost'.

See also Luke ch.24 vv 25-27 & vv 44-45. Likewise in 2 Samuel ch. 23 v.2 King David stated,

'The Spirit of the LORD spake by me, and his word was in my tongue'.

(This explains, for example, how he was able to provide a vivid description of the Crucifixion in Psalm 22 vv 16-18 one thousand years before the event).

In John ch.10 v.35 Jesus declared '... scripture cannot be broken;' and in ch.14 v.26 promised the disciples that the Holy Spirit would inspire them '... and bring all things to your [their]

remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you'. Regarding the Epistles, St Paul the Apostle made it abundantly clear that the moral commandments and teachings he was delivering came by inspiration from God. In 1 Corinthians ch.14 v.37 he warned,

'If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord'.

In 1 Thessalonians ch.4 vv 1-8 he concludes his teaching on morality by adding 'Therefore he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God who gives you his Holy Spirit' (NIV). It has further been estimated that over 2700 times the writers of Scripture make it plain that what they are stating doesn't come from themselves but from a Divine Source by repeatedly using the phrase 'Thus says the Lord'.

Owing to its prophetic nature it comes as little surprise to discover that Scripture also predicted the rise of liberal theology itself. There are several references to this and what makes the subject so sad is that liberal theologians are actually fulfilling the prophecies of the very Scriptures they deny.

'For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; ... And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.'

2 Timothy ch.4 vv 3-4

'Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, ...'

1 Timothy ch.4 v 1

'... beloved, remember ... How that they told you there should be mockers in the last time, who should walk after their own ungodly lusts'.

Jude vv 17-18

'Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming?'

2 Peter ch.3 vv 3-4

'... there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, ...'

2 Peter ch.2 v 1

See also 2 Timothy ch.3 vv 1-9 which mentions that many of these people have '... a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof:' (see v.5). It also describes studious people who are very

intellectual but who do not perceive the truth. In Matthew ch.24 along with the predicted increase of wars, famines, earthquakes and diseases, the predominance of false religious teachers is specifically mentioned (v.11).

Fulfilled prophecy reveals that the writers of Scripture were neither mistaken nor deluded in what they were inspired to record. The witness and sign which comes from this fulfilled prophecy is plain for all to see. No wonder Christians in many other parts of the world look upon the church in Britain with such sadness and dismay.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

- *Historical Criticism of the Bible*, Prof Eta Linnemann, Baker Book House. She was a liberal theologian who studied under Rudolf Bultmann. Later in her academic career when confronted with the evidence against a liberal approach to Scripture she abandoned it altogether.
- *Is There a Synoptic Problem?*, Prof. Eta Linnemann, Baker Book House.
- *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, Craig Blomberg, Inter-Varsity Press.
- *Scripture and Truth*, Editors D.A. Carson and John Woodbridge, Baker Book House.
- *Hidden Treasures in the Biblical Text*, Dr Chuck Missler, Koinonia House. As the title suggests this book examines subtle discoveries lying beneath the text of Scripture.
- *The Exodus Case*, Dr Lennart Moller, Scandinavia Press. This looks at recent archaeological discoveries confirming the events recorded in the Old Testament such as the Red Sea crossing.
- The Internet pulpit - www.internetpulpit.co.uk.
