

Churchman

EDITORIAL

In the Beginning was the Word

Christians today take it for granted, but one of the surprising things about the Bible when it first appeared was that it was the revelation of a God who speaks to his people. Other nations had their deities and propitiated them in the hope of earning their favour, but Israel had a God who spoke to them and who called them to obey his Word. Israel did not particularly like its God, who was often very demanding, nor did the nation do what he said. The Old Testament reads like a catalogue of rebellion against him, but however much the Israelites disobeyed and turned away, God kept calling them back. He punished them for their trespasses but he preserved them, because he had put his love on them and was determined that they would shine in the world as a testament to his glory.

Israel's relationship with God was not a private or mystical affair. It is true that Moses went up the mountain and communed with him "face to face," and the psalmists knew him in a way that still challenges and inspires us today. But for the most part, the Hebrew people learned about God through the law which Moses had given them. It was the same man who went up the mountain who then returned with the rule book, complete with a system of ritual sacrifices that were designed to make atonement for sin. Scribes and lawyers copied and interpreted that law, and prophets arose to warn the people when they strayed from it and to promise a future of blessing to those who kept the divine commandments. God demanded a humble and a contrite heart that was not content with mere lip service to statutes that could be observed to the letter while the spirit undergirding them was ignored—or worse still, traduced by over-subtle interpretation.

The Jews never developed what we would call theology, despite their great devotion to the written Word. The disputes that arose among them tended to be more about the right way of keeping the law than about the nature of God. Occasionally other things would intrude, and we learn for example, that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees rejected them on that account, but as long as both sides

followed the rituals laid down in the law they could co-exist within the bosom of Israel, which is what they were doing in New Testament times.

It was Jesus who changed all that. He was the Word made flesh, the living embodiment of God, who had come into the world to pay the price for human sin and to call a new and purely spiritual Israel into being. No longer would belonging to the physical nation descended from Abraham be enough to be counted among God's people. What Jesus and his followers looked for was whether a man or woman believed in God the way Abraham had believed. He had been put right with his Creator because of his faith, and those who followed Jesus were justified before him in the same way. The big difference was that the promises that Abraham had been told would be realised in an unknown future, Christians understood as having been fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. No longer was a difference of opinion about resurrection tolerable among God's people—on that question, to believe in Christ was to side with the Pharisees and to exclude the Sadducees.

Of course, as we know, that did not mean that the Pharisees were in the clear, or that they were necessarily more orthodox than their rivals. They may have believed the right thing as far as coming back from the dead was concerned, but in other ways their hearts were far from perfect, and thanks to the Gospels, their reputation is far from flattering. The Sadducees have been more or less forgotten, but the Pharisees have been transformed into a paradigm for all kinds of religious hypocrites—people who pray to God with their lips but whose hearts are far from him.

As people were converted to the message of Jesus, their approach to the Bible began to change. Instead of seeing it as a book of law designed to keep them from falling away from God, they recognised that it was a revelation that was intended to draw them into closer fellowship with him. The coming of Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost set Christians free from the constraints of the law, but held out to them something that in its own way was far more demanding. This was an intellectual and spiritual commitment to the self-revelation of the divine being in a particular man. How that was possible, and what it meant for God's people, replaced debates about the best way of keeping the law. This was the beginning of what we now know as theology.

At one level the Christian revelation was simple and straightforward. God had appeared in the person of Jesus Christ, a historical figure who lived at a particular time and whose life and teaching could be known from trustworthy contemporary sources. Compared with the obfuscations of a mystery religion or the speculations of a philosophical school, the

gospel message was clarity itself—or so it seemed. The reality, of course, was that behind this apparent simplicity there lay any number of complex questions that had to be teased out. How could an eternal, infinite God enter the world of time and space without ceasing to be himself? What was the nature of the relationship between Jesus of Nazareth and God the Father in heaven? How can sinful human beings be justified in the presence of a holy and righteous God? These questions, and others like them, became the stuff of theology, and it would be an understatement to say that there were disagreements about them.

Some people rejected the entire message, and became enemies of the new faith. Others accepted parts of it but thought they could improve on what had been left unsaid. For example, Jesus had tolerated remarriage after the death of a spouse, but in the minds of some early Christians, the true believer should live like the angels in heaven, who do not marry at all. Asceticism arose to challenge the gospel by trying to bring heaven down to earth, or as theologians would say, by proposing a “realised eschatology.” It was refuted by people who knew better, but its appeal proved to be tenacious, and it left a deep mark on the church that can still be seen today.

Most Christians resisted these extremes and did their best to explain who Jesus was and what he did by staying within the limits of the biblical revelation. Even so, it was not easy. Finding a way to describe how Jesus could be fully God without denying monotheism proved to be a contentious issue, which it took many centuries to resolve. Equally problematic was the relationship between the divine and the human natures of the incarnate Word. Was Jesus fully God and fully man, or was he some mixture or compromise of two fundamentally incompatible natures? Today theological students study these ancient debates in a week or two, and to them the final answer to the questions they raised appears to be fairly straightforward. They do not immediately realise that it took several lifetimes to work out what was truly “orthodox” and what was not. Even today the Christological debates over the person and natures of the Saviour have not been finally settled, as the continuing existence of both Monophysite (or Miaphysite) and Nestorian churches attests. Are these churches heretical, or do they bear witness to a time when the classical definitions of Christ’s being had not been fully worked out? In other words, are they perverse or just primitive in their theology?

Nor is that the only question on the table. In the ancient creeds, we confess our belief in God the Father who is Almighty, but we do not say the same of the Son or of the Holy Spirit. In this, we are being faithful to

the theology of the second-century church, which attributed omnipotence to the one God and identified him with the Father of Jesus Christ. Does the creeds' failure to apply the term "Almighty" to the Son and the Holy Spirit mean that we believe that the Father is God in a way that the others are not? Modern Christians will answer that it does not—we believe that all three persons of the Godhead are equal and therefore that all three are Almighty. It is just that for traditional reasons, we do not actually say so in the creeds, which on this point come across as representing a more "primitive" phase of theological development. Yet anyone who tried to use that as an argument for *denying* the omnipotence of the Son and the Spirit would immediately be branded as heretical—and rightly so.

What this example teaches us is that theological formulations can survive even as the teaching they encapsulate grows and deepens in ways that make them outdated and misleading. The fourth-century Arians who denied the deity of Christ could easily have recited the first article of the creeds, and some of them did not hesitate to use it as "evidence" that their orthodox opponents were wrong to insist that Father, Son and Holy Spirit were equal in the Godhead. The Arians were not easily defeated, not least because so much of what they said sounded plausible and could claim at least some support from the pre-existing theological tradition, but in the end their theology was shown to be inadequate and they eventually disappeared from the scene.

Today we read about these ancient disputes with a mixture of disbelief, amusement and horror. To us they often seem petty—does it really matter whether the Son is *homoousios* ("of one substance") with the Father or *homoiousios* ("of like substance")? Should the church have been driven into civil war by this classic "iota of difference" that few people now understand? The average churchgoer today would probably think that a lot of fuss was being made about relatively little, but for those who know their theology, the iota of difference is crucial. If the Son is not fully divine, then we have not been saved by God. If Jesus was a creature like us, he could not have taken our sins upon him and paid the price necessary to redeem us in the sight of the Father. Something apparently obscure is actually fundamental, whether we are aware of it or not.

These considerations must be borne in mind when we approach current theological debates. Those who dwell in the blogosphere will be aware of an argument raging about whether the Son is "eternally subordinate" to the Father or not. Anathemas have been hurled by theological controversialists on both sides, and more heat than light has been generated all round. Is there an answer to this question that can

reconcile the warring parties? In fact, there is, and the opposing factions are not as far apart as they think—or want us to believe. If you hold to classical theological expressions, then you will interpret “subordinate” as referring to an “order,” which is quite distinct from “being.” To put it simply, the Son is “subordinate” because he does the will of his Father, not the other way round, but because he is equal to the Father, his submission is voluntary and not implied by any inferiority of being. This is quite clear from the Gospels, so “eternal subordination” appears to be a perfectly orthodox doctrine.

Things get more complicated though when people interpret “subordinate” to mean “inferior,” as is often the case nowadays. It is a false interpretation, to be sure, but it is what many people think when they hear the word, and if that is the problem, then perhaps it is better to find some other way of saying what is intended. That is not easy, because other words have limitations of their own, which may not be immediately apparent. For example, many people today reject the term “Holy Ghost” because to them a ghost is a phantom and unreal, and prefer to talk about the Holy Spirit. However, they forget that the word “spirit” is also ambiguous in many ways, and can even be used to mean “alcohol,” something that is not true of “ghost”! Replacing one word by another is not something to be done lightly, even if it appears to be desirable. In purely theological terms, the Son is equal to the Father in his divine nature—he is *homoousios* with him—but as a person of the Godhead he relates to the Father as a Son, accepting the filial duty of obedience because he is voluntarily deferential to the one who sent him into the world for our salvation. Both sides in the “eternal subordination” argument agree about that, but differ about what is the best way to express their common belief. Recognising the true nature of the problem may not solve it, but at least it ought to hold the protagonists back from heaping abuse on those who take a different position to theirs.

Other problems that have come to the fore in recent years arise from questions related to divine impassibility and so-called “Open Theism.” The God of the Bible is an objectively existing being who possesses certain attributes, though most of these can only be described in the negative. We can say what God is *not*—he is not visible, mortal or “passible”—but it is impossible to say what he *is*, because his being is beyond our understanding. In the early church, divine impassibility was understood in what we would now describe as “physical” terms. It meant that there is no external force that can harm God. We cannot hit him on the head, as it were, or do anything that might diminish his sovereign power. It also

meant that God is not moody, as we might say today. He is not loving one minute and hateful the next. He cannot turn himself into something that we do not recognise, because if he could, we would be in constant danger of losing our salvation. What if he were to change his mind and decide to send us all to hell because he was suddenly angry at us for what we have done? In human terms, love and hate are both “passions” that can influence our behaviour in ways that are irrational, and that can never be true of God. So in those terms, God is impassible and we must say that in order to be faithful to his self-revelation.

It is a different matter, however, when we start to talk in terms of personal relationship. Is God’s love for his people something that we would recognise as love? Is it untrue to say that he is grieved by our sins? Must we argue that this biblical language is allegorical and not a true description of what God is really like? Here we are on delicate ground. We cannot deny that our relationship with God demands interaction, and that he responds to us and to our sinfulness. At the same time, we cannot picture him as being weakened or incapacitated by our disobedience—he must always be “strong to save.” Much of the modern debate about divine impassibility arises because of this basic difference in perception. Both sides agree that we worship a God who cares about us, and many would also agree that God remains powerful and able to extricate us from our sorry state. It is how we express this that causes the difficulty. Modern minds are more concerned with “feelings” than the ancients were, and we have to respond to this. Merely reiterating what has been said all along is not good enough. We must recognise that we are talking about something different from what concerned the framers of classical orthodoxy, that our language is imprecise and that clarifications are needed so that misunderstanding can be avoided. Those who want to revisit the question of divine impassibility should avoid accusing our forebears of having failed to understand the biblical revelation, and defenders of traditional orthodoxy ought to appreciate that they are being challenged to find room in their theology for what is clearly taught in the Bible.

What has been called “Open Theism” is a facet of this. Whether its advocates are sincerely trying to make sense of the biblical data, or whether they are seeking to undermine the Christian faith by creating dilemmas that need not exist is a hard question to answer. Like the Arians of old, many of them are probably trying to express the truth but lack the theological subtlety needed to do justice to the biblical revelation, and so they end up simplifying a complex question. That they are prone to attack defenders of what is known as “Classical Theism” for their supposed

inadequacies does not help matters. There is nothing really “new” in theology, and anyone trying to be original in this discipline is almost certainly going to be wrong. It may be necessary (or at least desirable) to restate traditional beliefs in a way that addresses contemporary concerns—that has been the way of theology for centuries. But to claim that nobody has understood the truth until now, or that the Classical Theists were off base in what they affirmed is taking things too far. Pride is the chief of sins, and the modern desire for novelty and “originality” is fertile ground for pride to take root.

Defenders of theological orthodoxy must tread carefully across a minefield of modern intellectual challenges. We cannot simply take some new theory from the secular world and use it as a principle around which to restate our traditional beliefs. The “new” hermeneutic fails precisely because it tries to do this without adequately critiquing its own presuppositions. If the past is wrong simply because it is the past, we are in trouble, and this particular blindness must be spotted and refuted for what it is. At the same time, we must hear what people are saying, try to understand how legitimate their concerns are, and provide answers to them which remain faithful to the biblical revelation without getting trapped in outmoded formulaic expressions that no longer communicate what their originators intended.

In *Churchman* we have occasionally published articles that challenge the traditionally orthodox way of thinking. The purpose of doing this is not to undermine that teaching but to stimulate open and fair debate. It is important to let the challengers speak for themselves, and not to attack them before they have been properly heard. At the same time, it is also important to respond to them in a way that challenges them to rethink what they are trying to achieve. Some readers are upset by provocative suggestions, and understandably so. But the right response is not to issue condemnations but to provide viable answers to the proposals being made. Orthodoxy is a living thing and it is perfectly able to respond to such a challenge in the right way. The mystery of the divine being is very great, and words alone will never express it adequately. There is always room for humility and reflection here. At the same time, we worship a God who has revealed himself, and who has done so in human words. We must protect and defend that “pattern of sound teaching” and we do so by reacting when we see it come under attack. In the beginning was the Word, and that Word became flesh. How we confess this is of the utmost importance. As the Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians, “Now we see

in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Paul understood what the limitations of his human mind were, but he also knew that he preached the gospel of faith, hope and love. All three of these virtues have their place, but the greatest of them is love. It is in that spirit that we are called to engage with those who question our beliefs, and if we can rise to the challenge, then what we say may win over many who might otherwise reject the truth because it has not been presented to them with the love that only God can impart to us. Let us take up the theological task and fulfil it in the right spirit, so that the truth may be expressed in love and the world be shown that this is how God relates to us and how we as Christians ought to relate to one another.

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