WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH?

by Stephen Perks


Christianity is the religion of those who believe in and follow the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. If we are to follow Christ, therefore, we must know who he is, what he came to do, what he accomplished, what he taught and what he requires of those who follow him. The only reliable historical source that we have for such knowledge is the four Gospels and the records and teachings of his disciples and apostles in the New Testament.

Once we look at what the New Testament says, however, it becomes immediately clear that Jesus saw his own person, his life, his work, and his teachings, as the fulfilment of a tradition that stretched back in time not only many hundreds of years into the history of the people of Israel, but that stretched back in time to the very beginning, to the creation of all things, and indeed into eternity; in the eternal decree of God before the creation of the world. He came to bring something to fulfilment that had been decreed in eternity, promised in the Garden of Eden when Adam fell into sin, and announced by the prophets throughout the history of Israel.

Jesus appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt. 17:1–8) before his disciples talking with Moses and Elijah in order to demonstrate to his disciples that he stood in the tradition of the Law and the Prophets, to identify with the Law and the Prophets, and to show that he came to fulfil the Law and the Prophets. Jesus says: “Think not that I came to destroy, but to fulfill” (Mt. 5:17). The word translated as “destroy” here means to annul or abolish. Jesus is saying he did not come to annul or abrogate the Law and the Prophets, but rather to bring them into their fullness. And the word used here for “fulfil” (plerōsai) means cause to abound, to bring to completion. According to J. H. Thayer’s A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament it means in the context of Mt. 5:17 “to cause God’s will (as made known in the law) to be obeyed as it should be, and God’s promises (given through the prophets) to receive fulfillment.” Jesus came therefore not to loosen his disciples’ relationship to the Law and the Prophets but rather to intensify that relationship. Jesus’ life and work was the culmination and fulfilment of a tradition. If we are to understand the Christian faith, therefore, we must understand it in its proper context. Any version of the Christian faith that is divorced from or does not take full and proper account of this tradition that Jesus came to fulfil will be a truncated gospel, at best a misleading half-truth that will leave us devoid of the understanding we need to live out the Christian faith as the Lord Jesus Christ intends us to live it out.

If we are to understand the Christian faith therefore we must look to the whole of Scripture, to the whole Bible. We cannot restrict ourselves to the New Testament only. When Jesus said “the Scripture cannot be broken” (Jn 10:35), and when the disciples tell us in the Gospel of Luke that Jesus “opened to us the Scriptures” (Lk. 24:32), it is the Scriptures of the Old Testament that are being spoken of, not the New Testament. There were no New Testament Christians in the New Testament Church. The New Testament did not exist at that time. It had not been written. If we are to understand the life, work and teachings of Jesus, we must see them in their proper context as the fulfilment of all that came before him, and we can only do this by having proper regard to the tradition in which Jesus himself said he stood and that he said he had come to bring into its fullness. And therefore we must understand that it is the whole Bible that is the source for our understanding of what the Christian faith is, what we are to believe, and how we are to live if we are to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. As Augustine said, the New Testament is latent in the Old, and the Old is patent in the New.

Of course Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God (Mk 1:14) and he tells us to seek first the Kingdom of God (Mt. 6:33). But what does the term “Kingdom of God” mean? In order to understand what it means to put the Kingdom of God first we need to understand what the Kingdom is. The term needs content. It is no good having vague fuzzy ideas about what the term means. All Christians will agree that we must seek first the Kingdom of God, but when you ask Christians what that means, when you ask for some content to the term, you will more likely than not find yourself up against some form of spiritualising of the term that leaves it with no meaning for the real world and that reduces the life of the Church—that is to say the community of believers—to little more than a Christian mystery cult.

And so again, therefore, we must seek to understand what the Bible tells us about the Kingdom of God, and what the whole Bible tells us about it. If we are to understand what Jesus means by the Kingdom of God, we must understand the Scriptures that Jesus himself said speak of him, namely “Moses and all the prophets” (Lk. 24:27). As Jesus said, “had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?”
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It is the whole Bible that is the source for our understanding of what the Christian faith is, and if we are to live the Christian life as God intends us to live it, we must seek to understand the faith as the whole Bible presents it.

(And lest it be thought here that I have avoided answering the very question I have criticised others for not answering—namely, “what is the Kingdom of God?”—let me add that the Kingdom of God is the social order ordained by God to govern the whole of his Creation, and in the fallen state of sin this means that for mankind the Kingdom of God is a counter-revolutionary prophetic social order structured by the covenant of grace and manifested in history by the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those who believe).

So what is it that the Bible teaches? How can we summarise the Bible? Suppose I asked you to summarise the Bible in three words. What would you say? I suspect many evangelicals would say something like this: “salvation through Christ,” or “salvation through grace” or perhaps “salvation through faith.” But there would be a problem with all such summaries. Not because they are not true. They are all gloriously true. We are saved by Christ, not by our works, not by our law keeping, and we are saved through faith, and even this is a gift of God’s unmerited grace (Eph. 2:1–10). But it is not the whole of what the Bible teaches, and without the rest of what the Bible teaches our understanding of our salvation from sin by God’s grace in Christ through faith will at the very least be narrow and truncated, a cut-down version of the gospel, and more likely worse than this, it will be considerably distorted. This does not mean that we shall not be saved from our sin by Christ. We are saved by whom we know, not what we know. But it does mean that we shall fail to enter into the fullness of what it means to live the Christian life, and therefore it means that we shall fail to enter into the fullness of the blessings that God bestows on those who follow Christ according to his word. And this is the tragedy of the gospel that is preached throughout the length and breadth of the country today on the whole. It is the cut-down version of the gospel. Often it amounts to little more than hell fire insurance. But the gospel is more than this.

So what is it that the Bible teaches?

The Bible teaches can be summed up in three words: Creation, Fall and Redemption. This is what is at the heart of what the Bible teaches. Everything else in the Bible is the working out of Creation, Fall and Redemption. The doctrines of Creation, Fall and Redemption are the spectacles through which the Bible sees the whole of man’s life and the whole of history, and therefore they are to be the spectacles through which we are to see the whole of life and the whole of history. This is the foundation upon which the Bible’s understanding of life is based, and it is these three related doctrines that form the foundation of the biblical world-view. They should therefore be the foundation of our own world-view. This is our theory of everything. Any other theory of everything is idolatry. It is Creation, Fall and Redemption, understood as an interrelated complex of presuppositions about the nature of reality, that accounts for everything, that is to say that provides us with a foundation for our understanding of everything; it is this complex of presuppositions that should form the foundation of our whole world-view, the spectacles through which we see the whole of life, and therefore that will enable us to see the truth about reality.

This understanding of the nature of reality—Creation, Fall and Redemption—is diametrically contrary to the prevailing understanding of the origin of all things in our age, the doctrine of Evolution, which is not a scientific theory at all, but rather a religious dogma. These two religious perspectives constitute an antithesis, a complete opposition of principle. There can be no reconciliation between Evolution on the one hand, and Creation, Fall, and Redemption on the other.

This does not mean that someone who believes in Evolution cannot be a Christian, that is to say someone who believes that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that he came to redeem man from his sin. There are many Christians who have conflated the dogma of Evolution with the belief that Christ died to save them from their sin. Saving faith is naïve,—you are saved from your sin not by what you know but by whom you know. But this does not mean that what we know is not important. It is, because our world-view, our whole understanding of the origin, meaning, purpose and value of life shapes how we live, what we consider to be important, and therefore what we put first in life, what we give priority to. And therefore it shapes how we live the Christian life.

These three doctrines therefore, Creation, Fall and Redemption, are interrelated. They stand or fall together. They are not separate doctrines that each stand on their own merit, and therefore we cannot accept one or even two of them as the truth while discarding the others as being mere fables without this having serious and far-reaching consequences for our understanding of the Bible and the Christian faith, and consequently also far-reaching consequences for the practical outworking of the Christian life. If we dispense with the biblical doctrine of Creation, this will have a decisive effect upon our understanding of the Fall. And if our understanding of the Fall is compromised by an incorrect understanding of the Creation, these two together—a faulty doctrine of the Creation together with a faulty doctrine of the Fall, which will inevitably accompany it—will have a decisive effect on our understanding of Redemption. In short, if our doctrine of the Creation is not the biblical one, this will affect our doctrine of the Fall, which will also therefore not be the biblical doctrine, and then our doctrine of Redemption will also be unbiblical because
the Redemption that Christ accomplished for his people presupposes the Fall of man into sin, and this in turn presupposes the creation of man in a state of moral rectitude, i.e. righteousness.

You cannot really have an unbiblical view of the Creation and the Fall and a biblical view of Redemption. All three doctrines presuppose each other and are interrelated. They make sense as a whole. As soon as the biblical doctrine of the Fall is discarded or corrupted by being conflated with ideas that are derived from an alternative religious perspective our understanding of the doctrine of Redemption will be corrupted into something other than the biblical doctrine; and as soon as the biblical doctrine of Creation is discarded or corrupted by being conflated with ideas that are derived from an alternative religious perspective, such as Evolution, our understanding of the doctrine of the Fall will be corrupted into something other than the biblical doctrine, and without a biblical doctrine of Creation and Fall, our understanding of Redemption becomes something other than the biblical doctrine. These three doctrines stand and fall together, and they form the presuppositional foundation of the biblical world-view. Creation, Fall and Redemption must be at the heart of our understanding of the whole of reality; it is the foundation for our understanding of all things, the spectacles through which we see the whole of life and history. Without presupposing this foundation for our understanding of all things we shall be mislead about the truth. Life, the world and everything is what it is because God created it out of nothing, because man fell into sin by disobeying God’s law, and because God has redeemed man from his sin through the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. We can only understand the world we live in and the purpose of life and all things properly by viewing them through these spectacles, these basic foundational presuppositions about the nature of reality.

Of course the Bible teaches much more than these three doctrines, but without presupposing these foundational doctrines in all that we read we shall misunderstand the Bible. The doctrine of the covenant, for example, is a crucial teaching of Scripture, and a crucial fact of life, whether we know it or not, but again it presupposes the Creation of the universe by the God of Scripture, the Fall of man into sin through the disobedience of Adam, and the redemption of men from their sin by the Lord Jesus Christ. The redemption that Christ accomplished for his people was covenantal, and the covenant of grace only makes sense in the context of Creation and Fall. Without this it becomes some other idea of salvation.

So, for example, the ancient Gnostics, following the dominant religious perspective of their time, believed that the world was not the creation of God, but the creation of a lesser god, a demiurge. They believed that man has a divine spark and that the Fall was the consequence this divine spark becoming trapped in matter. Man’s Fall was not ethical, but metaphysical; in other word man’s problem was that his spirit had become trapped in a physical body. In this perspective, therefore, salvation is not ethical either, but metaphysical, that is to say it is not about how man’s sin before God is dealt with but about how man can escape from the world, escape from matter, in which his divine spark is imprisoned. The salvation of the Gnostics is not the salvation that the Bible speaks about.

Of course Gnosticism had a strong influence on the early Church and it was with much difficulty that the Church dealt with the problematic influence of Gnosticism, and this basically dualistic belief system has troubled the Church throughout history. The Church even now is not free from the corrupting influences of such dualistic thinking. The spirituality dominant in much of modern Church life is still suffering from the influences of dualistic beliefs that are alien to the Bible, and unfortunately the Bible gets read through the spectacles of this dualism rather than through the spectacles of Creation, Fall and Redemption. The modern Church often resembles a neo-Gnostic mystery cult because of the dualistic ideas that have become so dominant. It is vitally important therefore that we understand Redemption in the biblical context of Creation and Fall, and that our doctrines of Creation and Fall find their content in what the whole Bible teaches about these things. We must not conflate these biblical doctrines with the ideas and teachings taken from religious perspectives that are alien to the Bible, such a dualism and Evolution, if we are to understand them properly.

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