Whitefield BRIEFING

July 1999 (Vol.4 No.4)

The Bible Between Modernity and Post-Modernity

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Human Knowledge in Modernity and Post-Modernity

Do you want to be modern or post-modern? Much is nowadays spoken and written around this topic. Modernists believe that truth is out there and is knowable. They also tend to prefer what may be called *univocal* descriptions of that truth. That is, they are looking for a single, all-encompassing description of reality (often called a *meta-narrative*), and find that description in narratives as diverse as those offered by Christianity and modern science. By contrast, post-modernists tend to see truth as fractured, and our descriptions of it as locked in our own local narrative frameworks; no local narrative can be allowed to be exalted to the status of a universal meta-narrative. They therefore want to rejoice in what we may call *polyphonic* descriptions of reality - in the global village there is a diversity of narratives about the world, and no one may seek to reduce this variety into a single over-arching master-narrative. The term which post-modernists have for such an attempt is *totalisation*.

I want to think about modernity and post-modernity in terms of the status which each gives to the knowledge it thinks it has of the world - what we may call the *epistemological mood* which each reflects. Very roughly, modernity is more confident, and post-modernity less confident, of the truth of its knowledge as an accurate depiction of reality. (However, post-modernists can sometimes seem, ironically, very confident in their lack of confidence in knowledge.) Despite this difference, modernity and post-modernity may in fact be thought of as two sides of the same coin: they share the same epistemological mood in that they both accept an *all-or-nothing* approach to knowledge. Modernity wants, and regards as attainable, a description of reality that will account for everything in the world and make it all accessible to the human mind. Post-modernity has decided that, since this project is impossible, we might as well give up on knowledge. The post-modern philosopher, Jacques Derrida, has been described as suffering something like an epistemological tantrum: 'If he cannot have "perfect" knowledge, then he won't have any of it'.[1]

The Nature of Human Knowledge: A Biblical Alternative

It may be argued that the Christian Scriptures, in their content, and especially in their form, both express and prescribe a different epistemological mood - one which contains elements of both modernity and post-modernity, but which gets us beyond the often polarised debates between them. The key question here is: Does the Bible offer a meta-narrative? Clearly it does, in one sense. Every thought is to be taken captive (totalised) to

Christ (2 Cor.10.5); there is no other name (or narrative) by which people are saved than that of Christ (Acts 4.12). There is only one God, and all others are revealed as idols. If the Bible did not offer a meta-narrative, faith would be an optional activity, and mission and evangelism would be arbitrary acts of oppression and arrogance.

However, full account must be taken of *how* the biblical meta-narrative is mediated to us. The Bible is *polyphonic*, i.e. it is very diverse both in content and form. It constantly gives us different accounts of the same reality, different depictions of the same event, different voices describing the same thing. For example, as regards the content of Scripture: On the cross did Jesus die in our place (penal substitution), or were we crucified with him (mystical union)? Was David provoked to take a census of Israel by Satan (1 Chron. 21.1) or the Lord (2 Sam. 24.1)? As regards its literary form: Should we view ourselves as living as disciples under the narratives of Christ (the Gospels) or as creatures facing an impending apocalypse (the book of Revelation)? Examples could be multiplied.

Most Christian believers would probably want to answer 'Both' to each of the above questions. The point is that it is very difficult to establish logical relationships between each pair of these different viewpoints or pictures. For example: Must we be united with Christ before his righteousness can be imputed to us, or must we first have been justified before we can be united with him? If this question is difficult to answer, that is for two reasons: first, the single reality which each of the two images describes is deeply mysterious to us, and second, the Bible does not explicitly tell us how logically to relate these two pictures of salvation. If we think we can relate one to the other logically, say by subsuming one conceptually to the other, that can only be a provisional theological construction - even a kind of 'totalisation' - which, as such, is likely to fall short of the full polyphonic revelation of Scripture.

The Bible thus gives us many different pictures of reality, and both demands that we repent on the basis of them and assumes that we will never achieve a fully-rounded conception of God. Modernity and post-modernity can conceive of only an 'all-or-nothing' approach to human understanding; the basic biblical and Christian epistemological mood is very different. It is characterised by the fact that the reality of God is mediated to us in a variety of different linguistic forms which we should not attempt to reduce into one univocal meta-narrative, but which together form a polyphonic meta-narrative which we can never grasp in its entirety. (This aspect of the Bible has been explored by the Christian philosopher Paul Ricoeur.) The Bible's epistemological mood is integrally related its view of what a human being is. Where modernity tends to elevate and post-modernity to down-grade the power and scope of human acting and knowing, biblical anthropology insists that, as creatures of a Creator, we must live out our trust in the God revealed in Scripture while never being able to hold at the same time in our minds all the pictures which he gives us of his act of salvation in Jesus Christ.

It may be that as evangelical believers we have sometimes been too modernist in our treatment of the diversity of the Bible. The Bible is sufficient to give knowledge of God for salvation, but it is also sufficient, in its polyphony, to warn us against dogmatism. Kevin Vanhoozer has recently described this as a hermeneutics of humility and conviction[2]. The apostle Paul caught and expressed the Christian epistemological mood, when he, a very bold evangelist, stated that we see only a poor reflection (1 Cor. 13.12).

The Treatment of the Bible in Modernity and Post-Modernity

It is no accident that both modernity and post-modernity *objectify* the Bible. Before the Enlightenment the Bible was usually regarded as an active divine address to us; modernity and subsequently post-modernity both treat it as in some sense an object. The significance of this shift is that objects can be labelled, and are relatively easy to control; persons (human or divine), in their words to us and actions towards us, cannot easily be tamed.

Modernity's treatment of the Bible as an *object of study* was one aspect of the turn to a scientific view of the world in Western thought. Whereas, through the Church Fathers, medieval theologians and the Reformation, the Bible had typically been regarded as a book through which God speaks, modernist approaches to the Bible, which produced the various forms of historical

criticism, began to treat the Bible as a historical artifact. It became common to regard the Bible as effectively cut off from us in time and space. It was someone else's book; it could not be treated as some immediate divine voice. Thus, modern people would have to do some hard historical work if they wanted to gain access to its message. The form which almost all biblical commentaries now take, (in which discussions of the text's historical particularities, date and authorship are treated prior to textual exegesis), reflects a basically modernist approach.

It followed that the Bible was regularly reduced to something else. In his influential study of biblical hermeneutics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Hans Frei argued that in that period the Bible was regarded as useful in that it gave access either to the events it narrated, or to the general religious truth it expressed, or to the mythologising psyche of its human authors[3]. That is, the Bible was to be a 'library' book, studied and treated by scholars like any other book, before it could ever be a 'church' book.

Where modernity has tended to reduce the Bible to something else, post-modernity has tended to expand its conception of the Bible, playing up the diversity of its content. Two basic approaches have emerged. Some writers have a basically playful attitude: since the search for a true description of reality has been given up, what is left but to toy with the Bible - to amuse oneself with what can be done with it? As in modernity, the Bible is objectified - but it is now an object of *play*, not of study. Other post-moderns treat the Bible as an object to be *fought*. They are too wise to how the Bible has been abused as an instrument of oppression to want to play with it. They have learned from analyses of human nature which see all relationships as basically driven by attempts to gain power over others, stemming from Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century and Michel Foucault in the twentieth, and in various ways want to defuse the power the Bible has gained in Western society. The two approaches sometimes meet, for example in the recent work of the New Testament scholar Stephen Moore, who thinks that the best way to combat the Bible is to ridicule it playfully.

Recovering the Bible as a Divine Address: Speech-Act Theory

The human temptation to treat God as an object which we can control is sinful and as such ineradicable. However, its effects on our handling of Scripture may be resisted a little if we have a clear understanding of the Bible as a divine address to us from outside ourselves. In recent years, three scholars - the theologians Anthony Thiselton and Kevin Vanhoozer, and the philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff - have found the resources for such a description in *speech-act theory*, a theory of language outlined in the 1960s by the Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin, and developed in the 1970s by the American philosopher John Searle. The basic insight of speech-act theory is that to speak is fundamentally not to communicate information, but rather to *act*. Its central concept is that of an *illocutionary act*, which refers to what one does *in saying* certain words. For example, in saying the words, "I promise I'll come", I perform the act of *promising* to come; in shouting to you the words, "There's a bull in that field!", I perform the act of *warning* you; in saying the words, "Could you pass the salt?", I perform the act of *requesting* you to pass the salt. It is clear that many of the fundamental actions which God performs can also be described as speech-acts: his act of creating is integrally related to his speaking ("and God said..."); justification is an event in which God *declares* us righteous; in offering future to salvation to those who trust Christ, he performs the act of *promising*.

Vanhoozer, in particular, has argued that the biblical texts may be conceived of as a series of divine speech-acts, which collectively form a redemptive act by which God continues to act in the world, and which he makes actual in human lives by the additional activity of the Holy Spirit. In this conception, to hear, read or study the Bible is always to be *acted upon* by God - however much the Bible may look like an object in front of us on the desk or lectern, which we illuminate with various scholarly tools. One reads the Bible not so much to learn information about God which one can then put into practice, but rather to respond appropriately to a God who in Scripture is performing some kind of action towards us - promising, rebuking, warning, training in righteousness, etc. To objectify any text, and especially the Bible, is therefore to

make the *unethical* move of turning a person (its author) into a mere object. Both modernist and post-modernist attempts to objectify the Bible are therefore in effect unethical attempts to turn a living and active external voice into a malleable object. This is a sinful act, whether performed on a human or a divine author - and evangelical handling of the Bible is not immune to it. The Bible constantly calls us away from such objectifying of it by its very form as *a polyphonic divine speech-act*. That is, it disallows any reduction of the many voices by which it speaks into either one voice or into a harmless object. God may be truly known as an Other who comes to us in Scripture (the Bible isn't 'post-modern'), but he is never fully captured by our knowledge of him (the Bible isn't 'modern'). The form and content of the Bible, which bring us adequate yet partial knowledge of God, demonstrate how Christianity in essence avoids the basic polarities which modernity and post-modernity have established.

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