

A PROPOSAL FOR SHARED BIBLE STUDY

The Lambeth Conference in 2008 showed how, when there is controversy among Christians, the atmosphere can be changed by calm Bible study.

In the Church Times on 28 November 2008 the Very Rev David L Edwards, the former Dean of Norwich and Provost of Southwark, outlined a suggestion for shared Bible study, and followed it up on 10 July 2009. He and Paul Handley, Editor of the Church Times, have encouraged Parish & People to promote David's idea to invite deaneries (or other groups of local churches) to pilot the suggestion, even if some Bishops sat on it.

At any time, any form of Christianity depends on the Bible, but there are reasons to believe that this question about priorities is especially important for Anglicans today, when our Communion is being torn apart by disputes about the Bible's authority. And while it would be obviously unwise to plunge immediately into controversy about women bishops or homosexual clergy, there is no shortage of other vitally important questions.

A DEANERY-BASED STUDY PROGRAMME

David suggested perhaps four Bible Study Sundays in a year would be better than none or too many. Dates should be decided locally: e.g.

During Advent:

- What can be known about Jesus as a figure in history?
- In what ways was the history of Israel a preparation for his coming?
- What do the two Testaments say about morality in our own largely secular society?

In Lent:

- What are the big temptations in our own Church now?
- How real can be the personal relationship between a 21st-century Christian and Christ?
- And what does the New Testament, taken as a whole, say about Christ's self-sacrifice?

Near Trinity Sunday:

- How did the doctrine of the Trinity emerge from the New Testament?
- Is belief in God compatible with modern science?
- Has the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost been received sufficiently?
- And how should Christ's unique resurrection affect us?

During the autumn:

- Is thanksgiving to the Creator the best inspiration for care about the creation?
- How is nature celebrated in the two Testaments, and how does that look after Darwin, and so on?
- Is there agreement about what changes need to be made, if humanity is to continue to inhabit this planet?

BACKGROUND

As background David Edwards retold this story:

81 years ago the leadership of the Church of England was humiliated by the House of Commons. When new Archbishops of Canterbury and York had been appointed, they addressed a pastoral letter to the whole Church. It was brave, and it is relevant in the Church's situation today.

In 1928, the Commons refused to give their consent, which was then needed, to a modest revision of the 1662 Prayer Book. They had already exercised their veto in 1927, but the bishops and the Church Assembly (the General Synod's predecessor) had come back with their proposal after a few minor alterations.

Enough MPs now argued that the veto should be repeated because too many changes had been made in response to competing pressures from the Anglo-Catholics and (to a lesser extent) the liberal modernisers, although most churchgoers were content with the familiar book. A Church so divided was defeated by 266 votes to 220.

In the Church, it was then agreed that when the 1928 Book was used with the agreement of the PCC no one would get into trouble, but the Archbishops (Cosmo Lang and William Temple) went further in their pastoral letter, urging that loyalty to the Church as a whole should dwarf loyalty to a party in it.

Members of the Church should rise *"to a higher ground and an ampler air"*. They should listen to each other as they climbed together to a new agreement about *"the whole Gospel of God"* in *"a new joy and zeal and power"*.

To this end, the clergy were asked to join *"frequently and regularly with their brethren in their deanery or district to a fellowship of study and prayer"*. In some places, that was already going on, but many more of the clergy now accepted what was called the *"way of renewal"*. After a eucharist and silent prayer, they had breakfast together, listened to a carefully prepared paper, and discussed it, once a month. Morale rose. Was this the start of Chapter meetings?

THE RESPONSE OF THE LAITY

But the Archbishops also hoped that the laity would respond, especially in two ways. They were asked to *"set the clergy free for a more undistracted ministry of the Word and prayer"*, and to *"use whatever opportunities for common study may be offered in their own parishes"*.

The vision was of nothing less than this: ***"Let every parish be a school of sacred learning, wherein men and women, many or few, may together and prayerfully think out the meaning of the Christian faith."***

An assurance was given about what would emerge: *"Through new light shed on the Bible and new discoveries of science rightly understood, we are reaching a new knowledge of God and of his ways of revealing himself."*

See Roger Lloyd's [History of The Church of England 1900-1965 \(SCM, 1966\)](#).

RETURN TO THE BIBLE

Since the 1960s, there has been an unexpected return to the Bible. The emphasis has been on the light that shines from it as the inspiration of a Church which is clearly now a minority with a mission. Common Worship, which is revolutionary compared with the revision proposed in the 1920s, is used very widely because it is a treasury of biblical prayers and images. Issues such as ordination for

Briefing: Does the C of E really value the Bible?

women and acceptance for homosexuals have been debated largely in terms of the authority of the Bible, however that may be understood.

Inevitably, if more study of the Bible by the laity is proposed, that may be interpreted as a plan to recruit more people to a campaign taking sides in a current controversy. The text and arguments used on one side or the other are already well known, however, as are the appeals for support in the battle.

David wants to propose something different from a conspiracy in ecclesiastical politics. In the parishes, people inclined to the one side or the other should meet people not so inclined, and together they should think about the Bible as a book, or rather a library, which is not dominated by questions of gender or sexuality.

IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

In practice, curiously little is done in our Church to encourage study of the Bible. A reader may end a lesson with a flourish: "This is the Word of the Lord". But...

In many churches, the parish communion is the only service, or the only one to be attended by more than a faithful few; yet the sermon is expected to be brief and contemporary, with no time in which to explain the circumstances in which the bulky scriptures were written. And there is no expectation that the sermon will be discussed over coffee.

In Evangelical churches, more powerful preaching, Bible-based, is one of the reasons why larger congregations may be attracted from a wider area, but the congregation will be expected to sing songs of praise rather than talk about the complications in the scriptures. Groups and individuals are more likely to read the Bible in private, but it seems that such study is less frequent and less intense than it was in the Protestant past.

A WAY FORWARD

So how can we get a better informed fascination with the scriptures, to feed a faith that is mission-shaped, and that will need some fresh expressions in a society very different from the world of the Bible? Those Archbishops rightly said that the clergy would gain from a wider fellowship, but it is also true that, for the laity, the deanery or another district must be the 'school of sacred

learning'. The job of a parish church is to be a family, not a college.

Also, the days are past when the laity could be told to depend on the instruction offered by the local clergy. The laity have a right, as well as a need, to know and to think; and experience in adult education proves that most adults need a chance to speak up for themselves if they are to learn about what is true and important for them.

The expression of faith in a circle of fellow believers can encourage what is often even more difficult for the English: talking about faith outside church. Inevitably, there will be disagreements between believers on relatively minor issues, but a dialogue should be more profitable than silence or the mere repetition of partisan slogans. There should be no votes; for these meetings would not be synods.

If a subject is truly religious, it is best explored in an atmosphere of prayer. So let the congregations from all or part of a deanery and anyone else who is interested come together for a Sunday Eucharist with a closely Bible-based sermon for some 20 minutes, followed, after refreshments, by questions and a discussion for an hour, responding to what was said.

DID THE HOUSE OF BISHOPS JUMP AT THE IDEA ?

In the Church of England, the Standing Committee of the House of Bishops recently seemed to indicate that it gives scripture a lower priority than is to be expected from Bishops. David Edwards wrote to all the diocesan bishops about his suggestion, being careful to point out that no new salary would be needed, and other expenditure should be minimal. He was, of course, aware that arrangements in the parishes could present difficulties. The first step could be an experiment in a few dioceses.

The response was very encouraging. The Archbishop of Canterbury wrote with "enormous enthusiasm", and the Archbishop of York said that he would vote for the project. The Archbishop of Wales thought that there was a need, and there might well be active interest, outside England. The Bishop of Durham, Dr Tom Wright, our leading biblical scholar, was among those who took the idea seriously. The Bishop of Lincoln, Dr John Saxbee, who chairs the board with adult as well as earlier education in its remit, asked the standing committee to include a discussion in the agenda of the House of Bishops. But the reply came that no time could be found

in the near future. There were apparently protests, but the present situation is silence about this proposal, while a crowd of other matters receives attention.

David wrote: *"My own protest here must be my last activity as a gadfly (for medical reasons, I am now in a home for definitely retired clergy), but I continue to wonder whether some bishops could warm up this cold water, or the voice of the General Synod might be raised."*

UNCHAIN THE BIBLE

Particularly in the Church of England, there has been a great tradition of strongly Bible-based preaching, widespread Bible reading, and important biblical scholarship. That is a proud heritage, and it seems possible that, even now, there could be a re-formation of our Church, producing not only fresh expressions of church life, but also new thought about how to be faithful.

It even seems possible that non-Anglicans might be glad to share in the proposed study and contribute to its leadership. That could be a milestone in the journey to an ecumenical future of unity with diversity, and scripture with reality.

Nothing written and nothing private can replace what can occur when Christians speak to one another, mind to mind and heart to heart, and it seems reasonable to hope that in the parishes of the Church of England there would be enough willingness to see what would result from study days in deaneries, local Churches Together groups or other groupings.

Let us unchain the Bible, and open it to see its diversity and its glory.