

Unity and Diversity

- All Christians, everywhere, believe this:
 - I believe in God, Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.
 - And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, light of light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and on the third day he rose again from the dead in accordance with the scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father, from whence he will come again in glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose kingdom will have no end.
 - And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son], who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke through the prophets.
 - And I believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church; I acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.
- But despite being united – one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all – and having the same scriptures, Christians disagree about lots of other things
 - “If anyone says that after the reception of the grace of justification the guilt is so remitted and the debt of eternal punishment so blotted out to every repentant sinner, that no debt of temporal punishment remains to be discharged either in this world or in purgatory before the gates of heaven can be opened, let him be anathema.” (Canon 30, Council of Trent)
 - Icons. Apostolic succession. Mariology. Infant baptism. Unconditional election. Spiritual gifts. Gender roles. Biblical infallibility. Church government. Eschatology. Gay mirage
 - What are the biggest ones for you?

Interpretive Diversity

- Almost all of this disagreement stems from the different ways in which we do theology
- For instance, when Christians differ over the doctrine of Scripture, it's easy to see why their doctrines of other things are in tension with each other
 - The sufficiency of Scripture – *sola scriptura* as opposed to the interpretation of the magisterium / Church
 - The authority of Scripture – “all Scripture is God-breathed” as opposed to liberal or neo-liberal projects
 - The infallibility of Scripture – what do we do with passages we can't reconcile? **MISTAKES IN MATHS?**
 - The clarity of Scripture – why can't Christians agree on what it teaches? Is the Bible unclear?
- Not only that, but different interpretive methods exist even among those who believe the Bible to be sufficient, authoritative, infallible and clear
 - Allegorical interpretation
 - Literal interpretation
 - The grammatical-historical approach
- Even where people agree on this, their views on the shape of the biblical story affect their interpretations
 - Covenant theology
 - Dispensationalism
 - Trajectory hermeneutics
- And, of course, there are thousands of mini-debates about the meanings of particular texts, passages and books. Generally, however, these are not where the big disagreements occur

Some Practical Examples ...

- So, to bring this down to earth in local church life here in Eastbourne:
 - Can Christians lose their salvation?
 - Should Christians pray the Lord's prayer?
 - Do ethnic Jews have a divine right to the land of Israel?
 - Does God ever orchestrate painful circumstances to teach us things?
 - Was the earth created in the last 10,000 years?
 - Should we sing the phrase "I'm so unworthy, but still you love me"?
 - Can a Christian join the Marines?
 - Are Christians supposed to make every effort to pursue holiness, or is that dangerous legalism?
 - Should women give sermons?
 - Why don't we talk about world events as fulfilling eschatological prophecies?
 - Does God know all future events, or are they just possibilities?
 - With healing and sickness, is "the problem always at our end"?
 - Can children who have not been baptised take communion?
 - Should we teach tithing?
 - Steve Chalke: does the Bible contain mistakes? Did Moses / Luke / Paul get it wrong?
 - Rob Rufus: does the Holy Spirit challenge us about our sin? (Should we let off glory bombs?!)
 - Vicky Beeching: can Christians have gay sex?

- Nothing too controversial there, then ...

Pick and Choose Hermeneutics?

Punter: Do we need to get circumcised?

Pastor: No, it's not for our day. We're not under the law.

Punter: So we can break the ten commandments, then?

Pastor: No. Those are for our day. 'The law is holy, righteous and good.'

Punter: What about the Sabbath?

Pastor: That one isn't. 'The Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath.'

Punter: Is it an abomination for a man to have sex with a man?

Pastor: Yep.

Punter: What about to eat shellfish, or touch pigskin?

Pastor: Nope.

Punter: Right. What about head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11?

Pastor: Not for our day.

Punter: Prophecy in 1 Corinthians 12-14?

Pastor: You bet. Very much for our day.

Punter: Women being silent in churches in 1 Corinthians 14?

Pastor: Not for our day.

Punter: Tongues in 1 Corinthians 14?

Pastor: Definitely for our day.

Punter: Do we obey Acts 15 when it bans sexual immorality and idolatry?

Pastor: Certainly.

Punter: What about when it bans eating black pudding and non-kosher meat?

Pastor: Not so much.

Punter: Do we obey 1 Timothy 2 on praying for all in authority?

Pastor: Yes. That's for our day.

Punter: What about a few verses later, when it talks about women braiding hair?

Pastor: No. Not for our day.

Punter: Should we preach the word, in season and out of season, as in 2 Timothy 4:2?

Pastor: Yes.

Punter: Should we go to Troas to look for Paul's coat, books and scrolls, as in 2 Tim 4:13?

Pastor: Don't be ridiculous.

Punter: Do we greet one another with brotherly kisses?

Pastor: Not so much.

Punter: Do we wash each other's feet?

Pastor: Not so much.

Punter: Do we have a worked through hermeneutic for any of these decisions?

Pastor (wistfully): Not so much.

Note: the distinction that some bits of the Bible are 'cultural' and some bits are 'timeless' doesn't really work here – it simply begs the question, by saying 'we still do these bits, and we don't do those bits.' What is often lacking is a reason from within the text that demonstrates (say) Paul is moving from 'cultural' to 'timeless' instructions. In 1 Corinthians 11-14, it is rarely clear what, if anything, in what Paul has written implies his instructions on head coverings or silence in churches are any more 'cultural' than those about spiritual gifts. The Brethren did the first two and not the last one; most modern charismatics do the last one and not the first two. But why? What hermeneutical justification exists for doing this?

How Many Contemporary People Do Theology

- Here are three trends in the way that much contemporary theology is done. Do you recognise them in yourself? Your life group? This church? Your Christian friends? Conferences you attend or books you read?
- Advertising theology – theology that feels right
 - “If the theologian of the 16th century was a lawyer, the theologian of the 21st century is an ad man ... The ad man doesn’ t persuade his customer by making a carefully reasoned and developed argument, but by subtly deflecting objections, evoking feelings and impressions, and directing those feelings and harnessing those impressions in a way that serves his interests. Where the lawyer argues, the ad man massages ... By couching what would otherwise have to be presented as a theological argument in an impressionistic narrative they make it very difficult to frame disagreements. The most effective communicators of this type tend to be those who elicit and direct feelings most consistently. It can almost be as hard to have reasonable argument with such people than it would be to argue with an advert.”
- Inoffensive theology – theology that doesn’ t hurt anybody
 - “The net effects are evident everywhere: nobody can dare to say that their position is superior to anybody else's because that denigrates, marginalizes, represses, and oppresses. That therapy, conversation, and a general prioritizing of aesthetic categories now grips the church and its own moral and theological discourse should be a cause for real concern. In a world devoid of truth content, claims to truth are oppressive and thus personal, hurtful, and distasteful; and the church seems, by and large, to be buying into just this kind of namby-pamby nonsense.”
- Lowest Common Denominator theology – theology that nobody disagrees with
 - The body of Christian orthodoxy gets smaller and smaller as more and more people disagree with aspects of it. If we took that view historically, we would have no creeds, no Trinity, no divinity of Christ – no theology other than “Jesus is nice” .

A Theology of Revelation

GOD SPEAKS

IN CHRIST

BY THE SPIRIT

THROUGH THE SCRIPTURES

TO THE CHURCH

Universal

Local

Individual

Hermeneutical Humility

- None of us interprets Scripture in a vacuum, as if we were the only person on earth. God speaks *to the church*, which is made up of local congregations, which is made up of specific individuals
 - This is important, both because it means we should be aware that we are not somehow “reading the text straight”, whereas everyone else is biased ...
 - ... and also because it means we need to read it in conversation with billions of others who have read it – rather than writing them off as idiots, we need to engage with their perspectives to do theology faithfully
- When doing that, humility is vital, in four particular ways
 - Humility towards *orthodoxy*. There is a profound humility to operating on the assumption that Christians over the last two thousand years have been right, rather than wrong. As such, the bar for affirming something the church has always (or almost always) rejected should be extremely high
 - Humility towards *catholicity*. The same is true for the global church today. We should be aware of how widespread or weird our views are, and set higher bars for minority views than majority ones
 - Humility towards *scholarship*. Reading commentaries is a great way of finding out whether what you think a text means is what most experts think it means. You don’t always have to agree with the experts (who don’t always agree with each other), but it’s a good idea to assume a scholarly consensus is right until proven otherwise
 - Humility towards *eldership*. Most people in the church don’t read much scholarship, or be that aware of what is orthodox (historically) or catholic (globally). But Paul charges local church overseers and elders with teaching the church carefully, soundly, skillfully and in continuity with the apostolic faith
- Occasionally, these will clash. But you’d be astonished by how often they don’t
 - Go back to the list of issues that are swirling around Kings at the moment. How do these help?

Five Helpful Principles

1. When interpreted correctly, with careful attention paid to context, purpose, genre and authorial intention, the scriptures do not contain mistakes (the doctrine of *infallibility*)
2. The primary way of establishing the meaning of a text is to establish what the original author meant their original audience to understand (
3. The Bible is a big story, and the big story is authoritative for all Christians, although instructions given in one part of the story are not necessarily binding on those who live in other parts of the story
4. We live in the same part of the story as the New Testament church, and therefore we should obey all instructions given to believers in the New Testament, unless there are clear indications that they only apply to specific individuals
5. Obeying New Testament instructions will sometimes require cultural translation, where the meaning of symbols has changed across the centuries, in order to preserve the meaning of the original symbols