

Q&A: Is ‘ bad’ teaching better than no teaching? (ie is it worth attending the only church in my town even though I know the teaching is not ‘ good’ ?)

From the fact that you have been able to discern that the teaching at your church is not good I suspect that you are reasonably empowered in your spirituality and knowledge of the Bible etc. My gut says that here is an opportunity for you to be a giver rather than a taker.

If you remain in your church you can remain part of the (only) community of faith in your town. You can speak life where you can, lead “up” with humility and love to those who are appointed in the church to teach. You can use sacrificial service as a platform for the gospel. Without knowing the detail of your situation, my default advice is “stay in and bless.”

A couple of caveats though:

1) You do need to ensure that you are being fed. Bible study with godly friends is one option. There is plenty of teaching material available online which you could access. Be careful to maintain your own discipline of devotions.

2) If the church is militantly anti-gospel (some are, I’m just not assuming that for yours) then it may be untenable for you to remain part of that church. But be very very careful here. It is very easy to be correct in your theology but not right in your attitude. It is very easy to “leave” in a way that is

unwise and does damage to people. Seek godly counsel from people who know your context before you consider making this step – and if you do it, do it with humility, humility, humility.

Blessings,

W.

Originally: <http://www.formspring.me/briggswill/q/1010862419>

Q&A: why won't you say who you voted for?

Because, unless there's a significant issue at stake that relates to the mission of God through his church, flying my party-political colours simply gets in the way of doing my job. I do not want the reality, or the perception, that I use my "pulpit" to spruik for politicians or political parties. I try and stick to the issues.

Originally: <http://www.formspring.me/briggswill/q/1001468068>

Q&A: Who did you vote for and why?

I voted pragmatically and cynically. I did not vote informally, but I was tempted. I perceived no clear vision for

the nation, nor a set of coherent principles underlying the policy base. The personalities tired me. Only one issue had distinction in my field of view – would I prefer no NBN, or no Internet Filter?

When I received the ballot paper my reaction was “is that it?” My choice (which I shall not reveal to you) was not an affirmation but simply the result of a random vibration in my indecisiveness balancing on the knife edge between two pits of mediocrity. If my numbering had truly reflected my affinity it would have been 1.4999995, 1.5000005, 3 (we had 3 candidates on our form).

Originally: <http://www.formspring.me/briggswill/q/1001407581>

Q&A: Is it possible to feel like a dead bush on the wasted salt lands but actually be planted by the rivers edge and yielding fruit, Strongly planted?

Ouch. Yes. I think this is the disparity that often exists between emotion and reality.

In fact, it is here that faith kicks in.

In the words of a song I greatly appreciate at the moment (<http://www.metrolyrics.com/faithful-lyrics-steven-curtis-chapman.html>)

I am broken, I am bleeding,
I'm scared and I'm confused,
but You are faithful.
Yes You are faithful.
I am weary, unbelieving.
God please help my unbelief!
Cuz You are faithful.
Yes You are faithful.

I will proclaim it to the world.
I will declare it to my heart
And sing it when the sun is shining.
I will scream it in the dark.

You are faithful!
You are faithful!
When you give and when You take away,
even then still Your name
is faithful!
You are faithful!
And with everything inside of me,
I am choosing to believe
You are faithful.

I'll leave it at that – if you want to interact more, ask a
further question.

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Q&A: Should children and

parents be getting involved in social media (eg Twitter, Facebook, blogs) through schools? Some new research suggests schools will be left behind if they don't show some leadership on this.

I'm one of those that don't see social media as a "thing" that it's made out to be in the popular media. It is just another form of communication, albeit with some interesting characteristics.

You might as well ask "Should children and parents be getting involved in phone conversations, pen-pals, letters to the editor, radio talk-back through schools?" And the answer would be – why not? I know I had pen-pals organised through schools, and we were encouraged to put our opinions in writing letter-to-the-editor style.

It is a "new" medium, but it's an old form of engagement. And yes, parents and schools should be involved in helping children be good socially. Issues such as etiquette, watching what you say (lest your words come back to haunt you), how to have meaningful and genuine conversation, interact with the real issues, discern fakery from the serious etc. etc. – all are good skills and learning about them in social media would be a good thing.

Originally: <http://www.formspring.me/briggswill/q/925564093>

Review: Atonement for a Sinless Society

It took me a while to read *Atonement for a Sinless Society* by Alan Mann. It's style is full of ultramergent pomo-babble which normally turns me away and made it tough going for this particular storied-self. But the title intrigued me and piqued my curiosity. Finding effective ways of communicating the gospel of atonement in away that is faithful to Scripture, inherently Christ-centred, and readily grasped by those who are hearing it is something I have grappled with (as all church leaders and teachers do I guess). For this reason I persisted.



Mann's main premise is that the word "sin" has become meaningless, semantically diluted, in our Western culture.

Consequently a gospel that speaks of atonement in terms of the alleviation of guilt, or the forgiveness of sin, fails to impact those who nevertheless are in need of atonement.

Mann's suggestion is to consider the human predicament in terms of "shame" and the "incoherence" in their "story", a difference between the story they tell of themselves to others, and their real self:

"The chronically shamed fear exposing the reality that the way they narrate themselves to others is not their real self.

They are insecure in their relating, constantly aware of the need to cover the self from the 'Other' for fear of being found socially unacceptable. The shamed person lives lives in permanent state of hiding, even when interacting with others. Only ever seeking to story their ideal-self, he or she never wants their real-self to be found." (Page 41)

There are some strengths to looking at things this way. For instance, shame is certainly part of the fallen human predicament (e.g. Adam & Eve hiding from God and each other).

So is relational dishonesty and that sense of incoherence between the who we aspire to be and who we actually are (e.g. Peter's denial of Christ).

It also provides some useful handles on how we might consider the redeemed person. Such a person has allowed themselves to be exposed before the 'Other' (expressing faith, contrition, perhaps repentance?) and has found themselves caught up in the story of One who has never been ontologically incoherent, namely Jesus. Lives are "re-narrated" and therefore made coherent in Christ.

Analysis like this is not necessarily antagonistic to the truth of the gospel. Mann explores this sense of shame, self-narration and coherence in great detail – including an explanation of narrative therapy. Much of this is useful.

My difficulty with this book, therefore, is not so much the "What?" question but the "So what?" question. Setting up a semantical framework which is broad enough to express the gospel is one thing, actually bringing it to bear in a useful way for the Kingdom is another.

One of Mann's problem is that he ends up preaching his framework rather than simply doing what he suggests. For instance, in proclaiming "We come to reflect on his story.

But we also come to reflect on our own story." (From a proposed Communion liturgy on page 169) he misses his own point. Just tell the story of Jesus so it impacts our own!

He does do this somewhat in an intriguing comparison of the deaths of Judas and Jesus – both hanging on a tree, both under a curse. Judas' is the result of his incoherence – a shame-filled suicide. Jesus' is the result of his coherence – the being true to himself as obedient Son to the point of death.

The juxtaposition of how one is redemptive and the other is not is a useful exercise. And the application whereby we all see ourselves in Judas is also helpful.

But even in this he never quite gets there. He may get us to look to Jesus' coherence on the cross... but then what? Are we simply to be inspired? Follow his example? If we are made coherent because of Jesus – what actually causes that coherence, upon what does it rest? Mann talks about the “restory-ing of the self” (Page 151) through ritual (particularly Communion) but in this Jesus is simply an inspiring character, not a sovereign Saviour.

I think it's indicative of a nervousness about being objective in any way, or to talk about sin-in-terms-of-guilt in any form. For instance, Mann wants absolution in liturgy to be deliberately ambiguous so that all people can bring their own story to it and notes that “this is perhaps a story that only those who already dwell in the fuller picture of the story of salvation can understand.” (Page 157) For me this speaks of telling one story to the uninitiated and another to the more fully initiated – isn't this the same incoherence we are trying to find an answer for? No, narrative needs to meet truth at the beginning, and delve deeper as the spirit leads – but that will never be askance to what is first heard.

I think this book is well motivated and it is one of the better engagements of the gospel with postmodernity that I have read. His framework is not inherently flawed and would be contextually appropriate in many places (including Mann's own circle I suspect). But it needs some theological precision so as to make Christ, not story, central – and an actual telling of the story, more than telling the story of the story.

The book concludes with a conversation between Mann and fellow author Robin Parry who interacts with Mann at his weakest points. It's by far the most productive part of the book to

read and makes the task of reading the book somewhat satisfying rather than annoyingly circuitous.



Q&A: Were you mindful of your bucket list on your recent vacation? Did it contribute to or satisfy anything of your list? (by crunchiejen)

I looked for lobster but could not find it. Scuba diving wasn't on the list but it should have been. Now "become a certified diver" is on the list.

Originally: <http://www.formspring.me/briggswill/q/924803484>

Q&A: Do you think that Christianity is set up in a way that favours people who can read?

Firstly, interesting thought that Christianity was "set up." I'm not saying I disagree – I "set up" things with regard to

organising church and administrating a (very) small section of the people of God all the time. And I trust I do it with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But “set up” sort of sounds like Christianity is the outcome of a committee meeting or something – the reality is that it has grown organically and divinely chaotically over millenia.

I think Christianity as it currently is expressed _does_ presuppose an ability to read – but mostly because (in the Western World at least) – the whole of society is “set up” that way. If the idea of Christianity is to communicate the truths of the good news of Jesus of Nazareth to our society then that is entirely appropriate – you use the medium of communication that best suits.

In times gone past the emphasis has been less so. For instance, the early church had a significant (and reliable) oral tradition (that informed much of the Scriptural canon). At other times the emphasis on iconography, stained glass windows and other imagery were intended as a means of communicating gospel truth. The Reformation (in England at least) emphasised the public reading of Scripture so that those who couldn’t read could hear. And much of the early educating system formed around monastic libraries and the teaching of people to read (and copy) them. The gospel has always been contextualised in its communication.

The emphasis on reading I think simply derives from the fact that until very recently the best way to communicate information persistently – by which I mean the best way to say something to somebody else in a way that will last after I am gone – was writing. And so the _record_ of Christian truth has, necessarily, been writing – and perhaps that has shaped our society.

Of course we now live in an era when communication can persist through other media such as audio and video and perhaps we will see less reliance on “reading” in Christian expression. I

know, for instance, that I make use of a NIV audio Bible to listen to in the car – and I have given something similar to someone who had failing eyesight and could no longer read. People download sermons and expositions of Scripture. It's becoming less and less necessary to be able to read in order to not only hear the truths of Scripture but have a record of them.

But like all things historic in our world if you want to learn more about them then you need to “go to them” somewhat. And so teaching people to read so that they can delve into the authoritative truth of Scripture is useful – even necessary. And so is teaching people NT Greek and Hebrew so they can delve into the original documents. We teach people as much as we can to get as much as they can out of the written Word of God.

But the truth speaks to all and it is our job to make it accessible no matter where they are at.

So is that “favouring” people who read? I'd rather simply “favour” people and give everyone as much as I can give them to discover as much as they can.

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Q&A: Is it biblically acceptable to ordain women into any position of

Leadership within the church, or are those who do this in error?

I once commented on Mark Driscoll's imprecise consideration of this issue (<http://is.gd/dBDrG>) where I stated:

"Complementarians hold to a "serving, sacrificial male leadership and gender partnership" model of marriage and the home as a clear expression of Scripture. However there is a distinction within this view...

Some are willing to quickly extrapolate the home to the church – and this is not done unthinkingly, as Driscoll demonstrates.

However, others will argue that this extrapolation is not so simple or clearly prescribed by Scripture – where "man/woman" passages can be rendered "husband/wife", where offices and functions within the church are only broadly defined in Scripture. They would argue that allowing a woman to teach, for instance, does not inherently damage or undermine the complementary relationship between husbands and wives. They would cite, gently, that when Driscoll announces that the "sermon" is now over and that his wife is now allowed to join him on stage to answer questions that he is juggling semantics and that the men in the congregation are being taught by his wife just as much as the women – and appreciate it!..."

In this sense I am a "broad complementarian", taking the latter view.

The issue is that church life should not be antagonistic to the life of the families who constitute that church. In other words, a commission to ministry should never undermine a marriage or familial relationship.

Strict complementarians (women cannot be ordained to leadership) tackle this issue in the abstract. I tend to tackle the issue in reality, even on a case by case basis. Does the shape of this ministry require this man to forego serving his wife? Does the shape of this ministry require this woman to forego serving her husband?

The reality of this is reasonable easy to tackle when it's a consideration of women in ministry in the broadly diaconal/service sense (I include serving the body through teaching ministry). Because both ministry and marriage relationship looks like service and it generally just works.

It can get complex, perhaps, in the consideration of women in leadership (although the line between ministry and leadership is fuzzy because they are both acts of service). But the only place where any complexity can (or needs to be) resolved is in the marriage relationship of the servant leader and her husband. He can lead/serve her by championing her leadership/service of others. What that looks like or how that works might need to be sorted out by the couple themselves.

If the husband cannot bless his wife's ministry then that ministry is fraught and probably shouldn't proceed in order to honour the marriage. But I would say the same thing if a wife was unwilling to bless her husband's ministry. (And I know plenty of male ministers who inflict the cost of ministry on their wife and children without their blessing who need to take a long hard look at themselves).

So I have no problem, personally, working under the leadership of a woman. It does not impact on the relationship with my wife at all, or cause that relationship to be feminist or something.

Having said all that – this is an open-handed issue for me. I know that others read Scripture the other way. Strict complementarians have a place within the church and should be

able to minister and lead according to conscience and integrity. The “two integrities” principle creates complexity, but such is life.

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Q&A: In your view, what are the moral boundaries for ethical scientific research? Are the things that shouldn't be tested at all, or just techniques that shouldn't be used?

A question that professional ethicists have struggle answering. This is very much my \$0.02 worth.

1) There is a moral boundary. There are things that are wrong and things that are right and scientific research, like most fields of human endeavour is able to cross that line.

2) How do we discern the moral boundary? From a Christian point of view, the line is drawn along the question of whether something is inherently sinful. Two aspects to this:

a) Inherency: I wouldn't see something as unethical/sinful just because it could (or perhaps has) been done sinfully/unethically.

b) Sinfulness: In Christian terms, broadly speaking, sin speaks of rebellion against God our Creator. The concept has the sense of “usurping” the role of God in some sense.

In terms of scientific research this is often (and sometimes simplistically) couched in terms of taking control over “life and death”, or “playing God” (in somewhat more sensationalist terms). So, for instance, the right to take another person’s life can be seen as a divine right. To destroy human life in the pursuit of scientific research (or any other endeavour) is therefore sinful. Any scientific research that inherently involves the destruction of human life is therefore clearly on the other side of the moral boundary.

Perhaps a more general way of looking at this is in terms of “the right to exploit.” In the Christian worldview humanity has the right to exploit the earth and all that grows in it. (This exploitation is clearly coupled with a sense of caring for, stewarding, tending creation, so I’m not talking about something inherently destructive). This means that there is room (although not carte blanche) for research involving experimentation on animals. But in other areas (the exploitation of humans – physically (including death), emotionally, psychologically, spiritually etc.) that right to exploit does not exist and is rightly called abuse.

3) Utilitarianism is not the place to begin. The question “are the means justifiable at all?” is the place to begin. This is inherently an epistemological question (what is right and wrong) and requires an agreed upon moral framework. This is where the conflict often lies.

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