

Q&A: How does the church move away from the “singing group leader” = “worship leader” model?

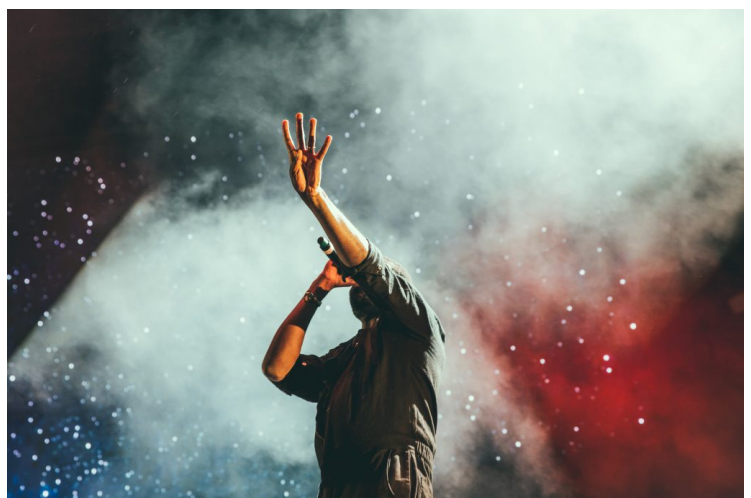
Anonymous asks:

How does the church, especially the evangelical/charismatic wing, move away from the “singing group leader” = “worship leader” model?

The same problem exists in the traditional robed choir churches. I recall hearing one Dean talking about the cathedral choir delivering “high quality” worship. I remember my first vicar preaching a sermon telling us that the same word is used for “worship” and “service” in Greek. I think we could do with some teaching on this issue at some point.

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Thanks for the question.



To get to your final point first. What you describe is a

cultural problem. It's something for which "teaching on the issue" alone is not enough. I can give something of a theoretical and theological response, but in the end this matter is one of the heart, of desire, of the orientation of our lives. It is, absolutely and in fact, a matter of devotion and worship.

I'm reminded of the complaint received by a pastor one Sunday: "Pastor, I didn't really enjoy our worship this morning." The response? "Well, that's OK, we weren't worshipping you."

To be frank, an honest assessment of our motivations for turning up on Sunday morning would probably reveal how self-centred we tend to be. That's not *necessarily* bad; we can come to church seeking relief, solace, or comfort, and while these are self-centred, God loves us and delights to graciously give us good gifts. However, we can also come to have our egos stroked, our angsts papered over, and our privileges decorated in virtue. "I'm not getting what I want from church! I'm not being 'fed'!" can be the genuine complaint of the spiritually hungry soul, or the entitled whinge of an acceptable form of ecclesiastical narcissism. Usually it's somewhere in between.

As a vicar, when I field complaints about church, ("The children were too noisy", "The livestream isn't family friendly", "I didn't know the songs", "The sermon was too long", "The sermon was too short" etc. etc.), I have learned to parse the feedback through this frame. Is it genuine feedback that I really should listen to? (It often is.) Or is it a self-centred demand for a better performance from myself or others? (That happens as well.) I have learned to look for the issue behind the issue. I ask myself, and sometimes the person who's talking to me: "That's interesting. What are the expectations that are not being met? Is it actually my job to meet them?"

This, of course, raises the question of what the "job" of Sunday actually is. Your suggestion is helpful here. Yes,

“worship” and “service” share some semantics, and the original greek words are worth exploring:

λειτουργία (leitourgia), from which we get “liturgy”, relates strongly to the sense of “serving.” It pertains to things such as a military or civic service, or the duty of giving alms to the poor. In a religious setting, the priests in the temple serve God, through offering sacrifices or administering other rites and ceremonies. It sounds dry and dusty, but there is a real depth to it. It is right to come to church for spiritual succour and solace, but we also come to serve God and to minister to one another.

λατρεία (latreia) takes it further. We find this, for instance, in Paul’s exhortation to the Romans. If only we heeded it, Sundays would look a lot different! “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper *worship*.” (Romans 12:1) Here worship is a self-offering, a *giving of ourselves* to God. It is this form of worship that we should be modelling for our children, every day, rather than the consumerism that our generation has bought into.

προσκυνέω (proskyneo) is a verb and speaks of adoration and devotion. This is worship in the form of a kiss of reverence, or of lying prostrate. In the gospels, many worship Jesus in this way, including the disciples in Luke 24:52 at the time of Jesus’ ascension – “they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” This is the worship of surrender, and love, deep love of God.

To answer your question: The extent that our church culture can align with these forms of worship is the extent to which our focus will move away from the “singing group leader.” Rather, the focus will be on a self-offering to God. In fact, the other reasons why we come to church will find their place.

We come on Sunday for **worship**, and also **discipleship** and **fellowship**. *Discipleship* is about having our whole lives taught and shaped by Jesus by the truth of his word and the power of his Spirit. *Fellowship* is about doing that together, spurring one another on to righteousness (Hebrews 10:24-25) and being united around Jesus. All of that is *worship*. And in that sense our “worship leaders” will be our pastors, and prophets, and teachers, and all the other gifts at work.

But in the end, just as we said at the beginning, this is a matter of our collective heart. To make that move would require cultural change, including the need for repentance. Many, if not most, of our churches enable self-centred consumerism. When worship is about me... If I go to a church *service* so that I can be well *served*... then I will be attentive to how well the *servants* are performing for me. And so I will prefer the high quality choir, or the anointed “singing group leader”, and that’s where the focus will be. I will value the *performance* because it adheres to my self-absorption.

The irony is, of course, that it’s actually in *real* worship, in *the* ministry (*leitourgia*) of our devoted (*proskynew*) self-offering (*latreia*) that worship actually becomes a moment of real fulfilment and self-discovery. I am “fed” by worship when it’s not about me, and, consequently, not about the person on the stage.

Musical excellence is not irrelevant, of course, and it’s worthy of some investment. But the musical leaders who truly serve (*leitourgia*) us are marked by humility, and self-effacement (*latreia*) and turn us to devotion (*proskynew*), not adulation. It’s not easy for them. We love our celebrities, and we will always be attracted to those people through whom we have encountered the presence of God in some way. It is understandable that we will turn to them to seek more of the Lord. We will want to pitch our tents there, as Peter desired to stay on the mountain of Transfiguration. The wise worship leaders will simply echo the voice from the cloud on that day:

"It's not about you, it's not about me; here is Jesus... listen to him."

Photo Credit: Austin Neill on Unsplash

Q&A: On current political and ethical issues, why do we not hear God in the same way?

Anonymous asks:

I read with interest the series of Facebook posts sparked off by your post of the Christianity Today article. I think it is fascinating to see how Christians come to opposing conclusions from the same set of "facts".

For me, one of the biggest problems not just in the specific case of the USA but generally, is what we mean by "discerning the mind of Christ" or "listening to the Holy Spirit". I am fully in agreement with the article and your counter-arguments against the pro-Trump people. However, how do I know that this really is what God is saying to us?

The same can be said of other major issues on which the church is split. Each side is sure that they are listening to God. I think this conundrum is something that has got increasingly difficult over the 40 odd years of my Christian life. For example, in the early 70s, I think the evangelical world was pretty unified on the sexuality issue. We could dismiss pro-gay views as being part of the liberal wing. Now, I suspect that even the evangelical wing is probably in a minority in holding to traditional views.

Why does God not speak to everyone in the same way or rather why do we not hear God in the same way?

The Christianity Today article referenced is: We Worship with the Magi, not MAGA

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Thank you for this question. This was sent in a while ago, and the delay in my response comes from the fact that this is my second attempt at answering!



At the heart of it, your question is about *disagreement*. In particular, it's about Christians disagreeing on how to discern what God wants, what God wills, or simply what he is doing. In my first attempted answer I wanted to talk about epistemological differences – i.e. our understanding of how we *know* things – and then set our feet on the solid rock of God's revelation in Scripture and analyse our disagreements from there.

It wasn't a bad place to begin. From that perspective of Biblical truth we can form an opinion on whether people (including ourselves) are correct or incorrect with regard to doctrine or fact. We can also discern whether people (including ourselves) are wrong or right in terms of the

spirit or character of our engagement. We can also reach for some conclusions about what things are *essential* or *primary*, and what things are secondary *adiaphora* on which we can disagree in unity.

On the matters you raise – Trumpism and sexuality – there has been much that has been written and said and I'm not going to rehearse it all again here. If our intention is to *disagree well* while holding to a robust epistemology, there are some good examples. A number of years ago I wrote a lengthy multi-part review of a book called *Good Disagreement?*. One of that book's contributors, Andrew Goddard, has written very recently on the same topic of sexuality on the Psephizo blog. With regards to US politics, a recent podcast from Premier Christian Radio, *Unbelievable? Is the US Church in the grip of political idolatry?* with Shane Claiborne & Johnnie Moore, is useful.

The reason for my second attempt at an answer is that I think your question might be pushing a little deeper. **It is a good thing to analyse the *nature* of disagreement. But you are asking *why* it happens.** Why does it seem that God is not speaking clearly? If God's truth is real and foundational, why do Christians differ so significantly on what we think that truth is? And if that clarity is not there, *how* can I truly know anything?

Conflict and disagreement about God's will amongst God's people is self-evident, biblically, historically, and in our present moment. Our trust in God cannot depend on their being a lack of disagreement. So we must find the right place for it in our thinking. To that end, I discern two types of conflict, which I will tentatively call *unfaithful* disagreement, and *faithful* disagreement.

The first category of **unfaithful disagreement** is needed because sometimes God's truth *is* clear. The conflict arises simply because there are those who wish to be faithful to what

God says, and those who wish to dismiss it, disobey it, or harden themselves to it in some way.

Many of the conflicts in the Bible are of this sort, which makes perfect sense when viewing Biblical history from the perspective of hindsight and a greater awareness of the grand scheme of things. There is story after story of various people whose eyes are open to God's truth being opposed by those who are hardened or spiritually blinded in some way: from Cain & Abel and those who opposed Noah, through the mumbling moans of the Israelites against Moses, to Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who killed the prophets and stoned those sent to her (Matthew 23:37). This is truly the conflict of light vs darkness, truth vs lie.

These conflicts cannot be truly resolved by compromise or finding the balance of things. In such conflicts even if an "agree to disagree" can be found it resolves to a *diminishment* of unity, rather than an *increase*.

Take the issue of state authorities, for instance. With regards to Trump the normal "common ground" issues of how God ordains secular and civil leadership (e.g .in Romans 13) are not really the issues at hand. What is under dispute is whether some particular anointing, even of a Messianic kind, attaches to Trump, the nature and extent of spiritual warfare and prophetic utterances about Trump, and the intertwining of gospel proclamation with the ascendancy of one man, and the violent actions of a mob in Washington. These are matters of right and wrong, light and dark.

With regard to the issue of human sexuality; there is a lot of complexity and nuance, and things to understand and embrace in the middle of it all. Nevertheless, sometimes the dispute *does* encroach onto matters of fundamental clarity, and we do face (on both sides of the politics, to be honest) fundamental matters of idolatry and grossly negligent handling of the Scriptures.

To some extent, then, this answers something of your *why* question. Why do we disagree? Why do we claim God's support on different sides of various debates? It is simply the human predicament: We long to stand in the light and truth of God, and at the same time our rebellious self-centred hearts oppose it. That essential conflict is therefore within society, within church communities, and even within our own souls. In our sin, we do not hear him as we should, therefore we disagree. This should not surprise us.

The response to it is *hope*. One day the Father of Lies will be defeated, and the One who is the Way, Truth, and Life, will shine and all will be revealed.

However, there is also a form of **faithful disagreement**. It rests on the reality that God made us good, and he also made us *finite*. There is *goodness* in our epistemological finitude; it is part of God's good design that we are limited in our knowledge of the truth. Those limits are a dynamic part of us that *draw* us towards a deeper knowledge of God, a deeper *worship*.

It's one of the reasons I am wary of Trumpist-like prophets who sometimes speak of getting a "downloaded" word from God. Biblical and personal experience, rather, indicates that God's truth is something that we have to *learn*. After all, Jesus had *disciples*; i.e. he had *students*! He promised that the Spirit would *lead* them into all truth (John 16:13). And through the various modes of ministry and gifts within the church, a process of *maturity* is expected (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Some of us will know certain aspects of God's truth differently than others. Some of us will be better versed in the Scriptures. Some of us will have had different experiences to bring alongside those Scriptures. In our learning there will be *difference of opinion*. But that doesn't mean that that *process* of learning is flawed.

Consider the ideal: Adam & Eve walked and talked with God in their innocence; their growth and maturation sprung, in all goodness, from that relationship. (Interestingly, the fall is portrayed as an attempt to seek knowledge on their own terms). Similarly, Jesus gathers his disciples and they sit at his feet where they receive the words of eternal life (John 6:68) – and that was good! It was good when they first started being taught by him, and it was good after three years of walking and talking. And, we might note, it didn't stop them having disputes – some of them painful – which were, in themselves, opportunities for Jesus to teach them, yet again.

At our best, this is what we see in the “disputes” of the church. They lead to greater understanding, and deeper worship. Paul talks to the Bereans and they run to the Scriptures with *eagerness*, (Acts 17:11), to test what they have heard. The leaders of the church come together in the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 and they ponder together Peter's experience with Cornelius, and the truths of the Law, and their own eyewitness learning from Christ himself, and they resolve the dispute about the inclusion of the Gentiles. They don't pitch these things against each other to find some shallow overlap; they wrestled *in their faithfulness* to Scripture and the direct teaching of Jesus, in order to grasp what was happening in their experience. From this wrestle came a greater fathoming and proclamation of the gospel!

This isn't some mystical magical thing; it's the ordinary experience of the gospel. Personally, I remember how one of the greatest joys of my theological training was the lunchtimes debates of one topic or another – well-hearted differences of opinion that forced me back to the word of God, to wrestle, to learn, and, in the end, it led to greater worship.

Why do we not hear God the same way? Because, in his divine wisdom, our ignorance is a call to worship, as we bring each other to sit at his feet.

How, then, do we know, with the issues that are rising in our own time now, **what sort of conflict we're dealing with?**

I will always do my best to take heed of the disputes around me – even the matters of Trump and sexuality. I may learn something from them, you see. Here's the framework I use to parse that:

1. **Is this dispute a matter of fundamentals?** Are we seeing, here, a matter of spiritual *opposition* to God and his word. Have we slipped from asking "What does our Lord say?" to "What am I going to say anyway?" In this case, I either call out the error as constructively as I can, or I walk from the dispute; it cannot lead me to greater worship.
2. **Is this dispute a secondary matter?** That is, does what I have learned from God's word stay the same on either side of the debate? I will enter into the matters if I have the inclination or energy to clarify my own opinion, but only if it's edifying. Paul warns us away from needless controversies (Titus 3:9) and about needlessly offending our brother or sister (1 Corinthians 8:9).
3. **Is this dispute taking me to sit at God's feet once more, to learn from his word, and explore his heart?** At this point I will attempt to receive the dispute as a gift, even if have to expend some energy and suck up some humility. In this moment it can be a great joy and delight that we do not all hear God in the same way; there's something more to learn from his Word.

The difficulty with the matters that you raise – Trumpism and sexuality – is that in different ways, with different people, on different particular topics, I have found that all three parts apply. Sometimes it's a matter of opposing what is blatantly wrong. Sometimes it's needless controversy. Occasionally it is edifying dialogue. You will see all three aspects at work simultaneously, and because of that, much

wisdom is needed.

Thanks for the question.

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Q&A: How do you distinguish between your feelings and what God is saying?

Anonymous asks (in response to a teaching time from one of our recent livestreams):

How would you distinguish between the words in your head and what God is saying?

I'm sure the Bible says not to act in feelings but if it's a feeling God is giving you how can you know it's from him?

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I really appreciate this question. It's an honest question. I think many of us ask (and answer it) without noticing, particularly when we are uncomfortable. It's when we find ourselves *confronted* by or *disagreeing* with something we read in the Bible, for instance,



that these questions arise: What is wrong here? What doesn't sit right with me? Why doesn't it sit right? How do I wrestle with it?

Too often, rather than wrestle with it, we put the niggly thing aside so that we can simply feel comfortable again. It is rarely the best way forward.

So how might we explore your question?

Firstly, let's look at things in general:

Your question is what we call an *epistemological* question. *Epistemology* is how we think about *knowing* stuff, particularly how we know what is right and what is wrong.

It the words in my head say something is true, is that enough or do I need something else? If it *feels* right, does that make it right? That's the sort of thing we're talking about here.

Our answer is affected by historical and cultural differences:

- Some cultures emphasise *tradition* as more important than individual feelings or realisations. If you *feel* something is wrong, but the cultural tradition says it's right, then the individual gives way to the collective wisdom. The internal process is like this: "I recognise that my experience is limited. Our tradition reflects the shared experience of generations of people, and is therefore less limited. Besides, I want to continue to fit in, so it is therefore more likely that I am wrong and the tradition is right."
- Some times in history have emphasised *reason* as more important than feelings or individual intuitions. The so-called "Age of Enlightenment" from the 1600's through to the 20th Century picked up on this. "Truth" is determined by logic, and science, and cold hard calculations. This is an aspect of what we call

modernism.

- In the “post-modern” era (20th Century into the present day) we have elevated the value of individual feelings and thoughts. “Truth is experience” is our catch-cry; if we can’t feel it, it is not true. There’s value in this. Cold, hard, abstract theory, is not enough to guide and shape our lives. Our lives are also full of creativity, mystery, and the delights of the senses. We are also aware that beneath traditions and logical frameworks there are often hidden emotions and prejudices and unspoken power dynamics; we *deconstruct* these so-called truths as the self-serving assertions they actually are. “Going with your gut” rather than arguing yourself into subservience is a virtue in this worldview.

What does this tell us? That the “words in your head” and your “feelings” are not without value, but neither do they solely determine what is true and what is right. I know from my own experience, that my emotions are often broken. For instance, I have had a break down and depression; during that time my feelings about myself did not match the reality about myself and I had to learn to realise that. There have also been plenty of times when I held a view fervently that I subsequently came to realise was *wrong*. It is impossible to learn or grow without agreeing with the possibility that I’ve got something to learn.

Secondly, how do we approach this from a Christian perspective?

Our faith in God introduces something else into our epistemology. We believe in a God who is not distant and aloof, but is *involved*, not only in the history of the world, but in our lives. We therefore believe in a God who *speaks*, through word and action. What he says is a *revelation*; it reveals truth about who he is, about who we are, and about what this world is like.

So how do we know what that truth is? How do we know what is being revealed? What is God's revelation to us?

The beauty of it is that God's revelation is *objective* and *external* to us. God's truth doesn't depend on us. This is a good thing! If it did, our sense of truth and of right and wrong would be self-defined. The truth is that God loves the world, and loves *me*, whether or not I feel it or "know" it. The truth is that there is right and wrong in God's perfect justice, even if my heart has been hardened and my mind has been dulled, and I am either justifying myself or falsely tearing myself down.

This sense of God's revelation is found in two forms:

It is found in what we call "general revelation"; there is truth to be found within creation and from looking at what is in front of us. "The heavens declare the glory of God", the psalmist says. "Since the creation of the world", Paul says, "God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made." This is how Christian belief embraces and recognises the value of the sciences; it is a study of creation and of humanity that reveals much truth.

It is also found in what we call "special revelation." That is, if God is close, and interacts with his creation, then God reveals himself in *history*. The written accounts of that history will then also reveal him. From looking at that written history we also see how God speaks through *inspiration*. He *speaks* to his people. Sometimes (but not often, it usually freaks people out), this is a direct "voice from heaven" (Exodus 20:18-19, Matthew 17:5). Often it is through the inspiration of a *prophet* who is set apart by God to speak to the people on God's behalf. It is also through the giving of the Law, and in the inspiration of songs and poetry. The Bible is full of these things: history, law, prophetic writings, wisdom and creative writings, the accounts of Jesus'

life, and letters from his followers.

When we say “The Bible says” what we mean is that “God has revealed himself, in history, saying.” God has even spoken about how he speaks. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). The Bible is therefore an *authoritative objective revelation* for us.

The beauty of it is also that God’s revelation is *subjective* and *personal* to us. God isn’t relegated to speak to us in dry and dusty texts with dogmatic formulae; he whispers deeply and personally into the deepest parts of our heart. He calls us by name. He *knows* us. Jesus revealed himself to others in this way. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit who is our Advocate and Counsellor. Sometimes the whispers in my head are prompts by the Spirit of Jesus. Sometimes my feelings are the way in which God is waking me up to his truth, a light in the darkness around me.

So how , then, do we *know*?

We can be certain of something when it all lines up and there is agreement in our epistemology. When our own feelings and logical thoughts agree with the traditions around us... when those things line up with what we read in the Bible and how we feel the Spirit is speaking deeply into our souls... then all is well and good. We have a sense of being *sure*.

When there is disagreement between these epistemological sources, however, we have some wrestling to do.

In particular, when I find myself wrestling with a part of the Bible that doesn’t “sit well” with me, I churn it over.

1. **I look to myself.** What I’m trying to do is to work out what is happening within me. I name up the feeling: Am I feeling angry, guilty, annoyed, fired up and frustrated? What’s going on in me? Are those feelings associated

with experiences in my life that I haven't resolved yet; is there some pain and trauma that is getting poked? **How is this Scripture offending me or moving me?** I don't pass judgement and soothe the feeling, I consider myself and work out what the problem is. I recognise that my heart is often fickle, I don't quickly agree with it, but I acknowledge the reality of my feelings.

2. **I apply some reason and look to logic and tradition.** Am I reading this part of Scripture correctly? Do I actually understand what is being said? Have I properly got into the world of those who first read it, and understood what they were hearing? Have I shoved my situation into the text and reacted to something that was never intended in the first place? How have other people understood it over the years? How have they applied it? What can I learn from them?
3. **In all this, I pray for the Holy Spirit to help me.** I ask for the Spirit to *illuminate* my wrestle – to give me insight into the Scripture, or an insight into myself. I trust that the Lord has something for me in the revelation of himself. Sometimes I've had a sense of words "jumping out at me" from the page, or stuck in my mind while I dwell on them. Sometimes the Spirit of God works through these things. But! Just because I feel it, doesn't mean that it's the Spirit at work. In particular, the **personal revelation of God to my spirit will never be at odds with his objective truth in Scripture.**
4. **I do it in community.** I share all this wrestling with others, even it's just one person like my wife or a friend. I explain to them what I'm feeling, and how that's colliding with the words in the Bible. We pray together. We reflect on it together. We wrestle together. And sometimes there's a prophetic word within that community that sheds light and makes things clear.
5. **I allow God to be God.** In the end, I entrust myself to God. It's nice to have our feelings resolved, and to be

comfortable with the Bible and God's word, but it's not always the way that leads to growth. Sometimes God is drawing us deeper, and we need to give it time. **I can avoid the pain of that growth by setting God's word aside** by either judging it to be wrong, or subjectifying it as irrelevant to me. But, if I want to grow, I need to allow the wrestle to remain. I fall back in confidence on the things that are sure – e.g. God's love and truth and the beauty of Jesus – and trust God with the rest. Even, and especially, when we cannot see, we acknowledge our blindness, and reach out for God even more.

I hope that answers the question. How we wrestle with our feelings and our own understandings is key to our discipleship and our caring for one another. Thanks for asking. Hope these thoughts help.

Q&A: How do we hold both conviction and humility?

Sarah, responding to my previous post, asks:

Hi Will, could you write another blog post on what conviction and humility look like? Speaking truth to power as you say.

Conviction is essential for obedience; it doesn't forsake humility. And if we are saying and doing things that our society agrees with, they will recognise humility. But if we are humbly speaking God's truth that is at odds with the world around us, it won't be liked, it will be hated, and the world won't see any humility at all because we are pointing to an authority higher than all others. We endure, we bless, we

answer kindly, we are humble. But we will have to be prepared to not be seen as humble whilst we are bowing the knee to the Lord Jesus?

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Thanks Sarah, and to others who have asked me if I could follow up on my previous post that deals with a perceived incoherence between two aspects of the gospel:



1. The truth-claim that Jesus is Lord. (The *message* of the gospel).
2. The character of humility. (The *mode* of the gospel).

As a wise friend commented, "Great stuff, Will. You outlined the dilemma well. I'd like to hear a fleshing out of the solution a bit more." This is my attempt.

I'm not going to ground this attempt in anything more profound than my own experience and an aspiration towards common sense.

It begins with an agreement with the premise of the question: the Christian call is towards both conviction *and* humility. These two are not at odds. In fact, in the Christian worldview, **conviction and humility cohere**, that is, they go together and can't be separated.

And I also agree with the premise that, in the end, the fact of this can't be determined by other people; it is centred on Jesus. This is point of contention, perhaps. Almost by

definition, humility involves an awareness of others, a willingness to listen, to be open to being changed and moved by someone and not hardened towards them. Paul is right: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." (Philippians 2:3,4)

The key to my thoughts is this: our other-awareness derives from our Jesus-centredness. That is, our humble approach towards others, in the end, relies upon us being found in Jesus, for Jesus, to Jesus. That is, **our conviction about the gospel is the source from which our humility derives**. There are a number of senses to this:

Firstly, there is a sense in which **Jesus is the greatest example of humility**. We saw that in the previous post when we looked at Philippians 2:6-8. To be apprentices of Jesus is to have the same "mind of Christ" and approach others in his mode. This is essentially "WWJD", which isn't always easy to practice: sometimes being silent, sometimes speaking up, sometimes standing against, sometimes submitting. Whatever the exact behaviour, the heart is humble.

Secondly, there is a deeper sense in which **Jesus enables us to be humble**. Humility is aware of others, but there can be a flip-side to that. I am also other-focused when I am driven by fear, pride, panic, hate, lust, and so on. If my sense of identity and worth is bound up in others, then it is impossible to be truly humble. If my identity is other-centred then any actions I do, even if they are nice and acquiescent will be at least tinged by self-preservation or self-fulfillment. Rather, if Jesus has captured my life (Galatians 2:20) then I am his and his alone; therefore I am free of obligation towards anyone else. I owe my eternal life to no-one else. Therefore *I am free to be humble*. John 2:24 describes this of Jesus, who in his humility, "would

not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people.” He was free of them, he was free to love them.

Thirdly, there is a similar sense in which the **Spirit of Jesus compels us to be humble**. There is a conceptual and practical aspect to this. Conceptually, the gospel is a great leveller: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Practically, we trust that the Spirit of Jesus is at work in us. “Christ love compels us” (2 Corinthians 5:14a), says Paul, and he is right. However that compulsion is manifest – speaking, listening, acting, resisting, or simply solidly *being* – Jesus doesn’t just show us the way and give us the freedom to walk it, he leads, guides, propels us forward. The more we look to him, the more we are moved by his humble, life-giving Spirit.

I think the the premise of Sarah’s question is right. Our humility towards others rests upon our dependence on Jesus. Because of this, we cannot, in the end, measure the “success” of our humility by whether it is recognised or not. It doesn’t mean we ignore others, or dismiss other’s opinions and beliefs – after all, Jesus, didn’t do that. It *does* mean we don’t fear others, slip into their traps, or concur with their brokenness; we are embraced by Jesus first, and we love others out of freedom.

And it won’t always “work.” It didn’t work for Jesus. “If the world hates you,” Jesus said (John 15:18), “keep in mind that it hated me first.”

Gill and I have certainly known what means to be rejected. It does lead to some soul-searching. Many times, we have fallen short of the humility of the gospel, and have not been careful enough in manner or mode. Sometimes, we have compromised on the truth. At other times, I have had to conclude that I could do no more: My physical size has had me perceived as

overbearing, and I can do little about that. I inhabit the role of vicar, and sometimes people respond to previous negative experiences of other vicars, and I can do little about that. All I can do is focus on Jesus and seek to be more like him.

But when it works, it works! I received a voice message today from a friend of mine. Here is someone who is fully committed to the gospel, and feels very free to share it. But there is no sense (beyond ordinary human brokenness) that that conviction is not manifest in a Jesus-centred humility. Take a listen to Uncle Nige:

<http://briggs.id.au/jour/files/2020/02/Nige20200222.mp3>

And finally, I was struck today by an article that summed it up really well, from the point of view of Adam Neder, a Christian teacher. He conceives of humility as an *awareness of our weakness*, and therefore a dependence on the Spirit.

Many of us who teach Christian theology are keenly aware of the poverty of our language in comparison to the reality of God. We try our best to speak truthfully and faithfully, but our words often seem thin and unreal, they taste like ashes on our tongues, and we wonder if our teaching will add up to anything more than wasted time. In extreme cases, this trajectory of thought and feeling can lead to a deadening acedia that takes root within us and leaves us hopeless or in despair.

But an awareness of our dependence on the Spirit moves us in the opposite direction. It eases the pressure by displacing the teacher from the center of the educational process. It relativizes our weaknesses. It does not eliminate them, and it certainly does not excuse them, but it assures us that God rises above them. And this awareness becomes an essential source of freedom and joy for those who believe and depend on

it, whereas for those who do not, teaching can become a burden too heavy to bear—at least for teachers who want their students to know God personally.

Humility is an awareness of the “poverty of our language” and a “displacing the teacher from the center.” When we come full of ourselves, with controlling systems, asserted techniques, and market-proven strategies, we are missing the mode of the gospel. When we come dependent on the Spirit, that is the power and freedom to humbly gift ourselves to the world. Whether the world receives us or not is not for us to know or control.

That then is the only “solution” I can offer: Jesus first, the rest of it will follow.

Image credit: Pjposullivan

Q&A: What’s your take on spiritual attack, Satan, demons, and all that kind of stuff?

Anonymous asks:

What’s your take on spiritual attack, Satan, demons and all that kind of stuff?

How do you know what’s actually ‘powers and principalities in the heavenly realms’ and us over spiritualising stuff (ie: ‘I lost my keys... IT MUST BE SATAN!!!!!’)

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

Thank you for an interesting question. I'm going to approach it in two different directions: Firstly, by looking at Ephesians 6, which you are quoting. Secondly, by unpacking some of the popular thinking and experiences of "spiritual attack" and seeing if we can make sense of it.



So, firstly, **POWERS AND PRINCIPALITIES IN THE HEAVENLY PLACES.**

You are quoting Ephesians 6:12:

*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil **in the heavenly realms.** (NIV)*

As with all snap quotes from the Bible, the best way to grasp the meaning is to look at the verse in its context. This verse, for instance, uses a bunch of keywords and phrases that Paul is threading into his letter to the Ephesians.

One of these threads is the phrase "heavenly realms" which, here in 6:12, is the location of "spiritual forces of evil." However, at the beginning of the letter, in his opening lines (Ephesians 1:3), it is also the place of "every spiritual blessing:"

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us **in the heavenly realms** with every spiritual blessing in Christ. (NIV)*

The phrase “every spiritual blessing” ties back into the fundamental hope and mission of God’s people, to embody the covenant promise of God, that Abraham would be *blessed*, and so bless the whole world. God keeps his word, and fulfils his promise in Jesus. And now the whole world – Jew and Gentile – are drawn together in Christ into that same blessing. This is God’s victory, purpose, and wisdom, and it is also present “in the heavenly realms.” In Ephesians 3:10-11 we read:

*His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities **in the heavenly realms**, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

What, then, are the “heavenly realms”? The popular caricature is of clouds and cherubs or something like what is imagined in The Good Place. In this imagining, heaven is “up there”, the real world is “down here” and while there may be the occasional cross-over, with souls coming and going and angels and demons intervening from time to time, they are essentially separate. Perhaps this is close to the imagined scenario of demonic key thievery that you allude to in your question.

It’s the same with the word “spiritual.” We take this word and we often make it mean something like “ethereal” or “out there” or “other.” So “spiritual blessing” becomes something pie in the sky and “spiritual warfare” makes us think of some Greek-legend type battle going on in some distant galactic plane; we participate by making sure our little patch of the here-and-now on earth is backing the right side.

I don’t see any of that in Ephesians.

Rather, for Paul, the idea of “heavenly realms” and spiritual things is fully intertwined and interconnected with real-world experiences, and real-world “powers and principalities.” He uses language that draws on a cosmology in which the earth itself is immersed in the “heavens”, plural.

In this framework, one of the heavens is the very atmosphere we breathe. After all, you can't see the wind, but you can see what it does; it's an unseen power, intertwined and interacting with all that exists and all that happens. And so Paul speaks of a spiritual power in Ephesians 2:2 as the "ruler of the kingdom of the air." He literally means the air. The word "spirit" in the Greek is "pneuma" – meaning "breath" or "wind" – from which we get words like "pneumatic tires." Your car tyres are filled with the heavens, and your lungs are spiritual pumps. We live, breathe, and are immersed in this spiritual realm.

Paul's worldview simply extrapolates this. The wind speaks of unseen power, and Paul sees other unseen "powers and principalities" that are, nevertheless, real and present and intertwined with our existence. Think of how we talk about people being affected by "market forces" or having circumstances that change with the "political atmosphere" and you're starting to get a glimpse of what he's talking about. We talk about the scourge of "long-term unemployment" or an "epidemic of alcoholism" or an "hypersexual milieu" or "a patriarchal culture" and we have a sense of encountering powerful things that are real but invisible. For Paul these grounded, connected, intertwined-with-reality heavenly realms are a location for God's activity and intervention.

These "heavenly realms" include "spiritual forces of evil." I can imagine the winds of the military conflict, or engrained injustice, or the bondage of addictive behaviours, being expressions of demonic activity as well as human sin. That's Ephesians 6. But I also see God's assurance to his people: "I have blessed you with every spiritual blessing" in these heavenly realms. God's intervention in his creation is through his new people, brought together in Jesus. Against the injustice, and cruelty, and diabolical hatred of the image of God in humanity – i.e. against the powers and principalities – God has made his people not to be caged and slaves to fear,

but blessed and victorious. We now put on the armour of God, and live and work towards extending that blessing in the power of the Spirit.

So, to return to your question, what's my take on "spiritual attack"? It is the very essence of growing the Kingdom of God. As we worship, and proclaim, and act in accord with God's truth and purpose, we impact and overcome the unseen powerful things that are in the air around us. We look to see lives, families, communities, cities, nations moved by the right Spirit. After all, that is what it means to "baptise nations in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:18-20); it is to immerse *nations* in God's character, under the authority of King Jesus, and "teaching them to obey everything that Jesus commanded us." Just as Jesus rose from the dead, just as the earth and the heavens will be made new at the end, so this evangelistic good-news bringing mission overcomes these unseen evil powers.

I can imagine some of those unseen powers wanting to undermine that work: lie instead of truth, bondage instead of freedom, cruelty instead of justice, chaos instead of peace. When we encounter those strongholds, or when they encounter us, that's what I think of as "spiritual attack." This is where Ephesians takes me.

But secondly, to reflect, just quickly on our **PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF SPIRITUAL ATTACK**.

Often this comes into play when we have a negative experience: e.g. We experience loss, bereavement, disappointment, hurt, pain, frustration, sinfulness. Maybe we even lose our car keys (I once couldn't find my car keys and missed out on an important family occasion, that certainly felt like a loss). We interpret this pain as "spiritual attack" and somehow deflect the pain and attempt to give it some meaning. Sometimes we are grasping at something that's not there.

Are negative times like these “spiritual attack”? I have a “yes” and “no” answer.

My “yes” comes when I can discern an active aspect of those powers in Paul’s heavenly realms.

I have, for instance, seen good people, doing good things for the kingdom, facing vehement accusation and even hatred. It’s a step beyond mere frustration, it is almost irrational; something in the atmosphere shifts and it is conceivable that something unseen is out to get good people, and tear them down. It makes me want to put some Ephesians 6 armour on.

Similarly, I have seen people battling addictive behaviours and the general malaise of life; I have seen them begin to lift their heads, breathe some freedom, get some vision, only to be broadsided by something and brought back down. It’s as if something has reached up, like the Balrog with Gandalf, and dragged them back into bondage. It makes me want to pick up some of God’s truth, and fight for them.

My “no” comes when I discern other things at work:

We live in a fallen world. Bad things happen to good people. Sometimes, simply, detritus happens, as the saying goes. The focus at these times is to bring it all back to Father God, the source of the evil is neither here nor there.

Sometimes the adversity is a “time of trial.” Was Israel’s wandering in the wilderness “spiritual attack”? Was David’s time in exile “spiritual attack”? Is Job’s story a story of “spiritual attack”? I’m not sure I’d even classify Jesus in the wilderness as “spiritual attack”, despite the actual demonic presence! Rather, these are often times when the devil must beat a hasty retreat! It is in these times that the Lord builds our faith, bolsters our reliance on him, and draws us to himself. If there is any “spiritual attack” on the church, it is not so much in the adversity we face, but in our addiction to comfort and our demand to meet God on our own

terms! Be wary of the evil one when things are easy, not when things are hard.

Thanks for the question.

Q&A: Are prophets today like those in the OT? How do we weigh prophecy?

Alan asks:

Just read your blog. It sounded very true to life in the church. I have a couple of questions.

Is a prophet under the New Covenant different to one under the Old Covenants? The Old Covenant prophets had the potential to write Scripture. The word of the Lord came to them. In the New Covenant the church is required to weigh prophecy and is not allowed to become Scripture. How do we recognise the genuine prophecy from the mistaken or deliberately misleading. For example, it is easy to find prophecies on the internet about the rightness of Brexit. Given the divided opinion of Christians on this issue, how would the church “weigh” such prophecy?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

Hi Alan, thanks for the question. What I offer here isn't particularly systematic, but it's how I've wrestled with it.



The tricky thing is in the definition of “prophet.” The term can get used very broadly and also very narrowly, and while neither use is improper, we need to understand what is meant. I’m going to work from broad to narrow:

BROADLY SPEAKING a “prophet”...

- speaks *truth*. This is often in adverse circumstances; a prophet often speaks truth to power. The “speech” may not actually be words, e.g. prophetic “speech acts” are recognised in the Bible, but it *does* involve communication.
- guards *values*. There is an idealism in the prophetic, and lip-service doesn’t count. Prophets tend to understand and call-out motivations as well as actions.
- expects *movement* or *change*. Whatever a prophet says has a landing point, a point of application, a place to repent, or from which to be spurred on.

We can refer to “prophetic people” or even “modern day prophets” in this broad sense. Think of the agitators and dissenters in society, the “activists.” Their activism may be misplaced, or not, but they *are* acting “prophetically”; they are guarding values, speaking truth, expecting change. It can look like environmentalism, or speaking out on the

hypersexualisation of society, or civil disobedience against compulsory school curriculum, or any number of things... you know what I mean.

Interestingly, perhaps, recent thinking about the “fivefold” ministry of Ephesians 4 considers the fivefold to be a recapitulation of human gifting more generally. At this broad level we are recognising the prophetic in humanity more generally. This is certainly Hirsch’s position in his exhaustive, although somewhat flawed, 5Q.

Let’s keep **NARROWING IT DOWN**, though.

The Bible recognises, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, charismatically gifted prophets.

- They speak truth, as some sense of *divine* truth. They bring a “word from God” in some sense.
- They guard values, as some sense of *God’s* values. They often articulate the gap between our wayward hearts and idolatrous attitudes, and God’s call, purpose, and instruction.
- They expect *movement* or *change*. Sometimes encouraging, sometimes warning, always showing the way for people to draw closer to God. Often kind and encouraging, occasionally a tough-love “Stop! Turn around!”

This is where I would locate the exercise of prophetic gifts in today’s world. It is also where I would locate most of the New Testament prophets.

I don’t like demarcating things here at the “Old Covenant / New Covenant” line, though. There are many examples in the Old Testament in which the term “prophets” means what I think it means here. e.g. 1 Samuel 10:10-11 refers to Saul’s Spirit-filled prophesying; in and around Elijah and Elisha there are “groups of prophets” who are clearly prophets of a less authoritative sort (1 Samuel 10:5-6); Ezra 5:2 talks about attempts at rebuilding the temple being supported by “the

prophets of God.”

In the New Testament, we can see people like Paul encouraging God’s people to exercise the gift of prophecy, because “the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort.” (1 Corinthians 14:3). Indeed, the meaning of Pentecost in Acts 2 is explained using Zechariah’s words that “in the last days... your sons and your daughters will prophesy” (Acts 2:17-18). Prophecy is not only listed in the fivefold giftings of Ephesians 4, but also within Paul’s gift-lists of 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12; “If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith” (Romans 12:6).

The example I like the most is found in Acts in the person of Agabus. We encounter him twice. The first is in Acts 11:28 where he prophesies (accurately) that a famine would spread over the whole Roman world. This prophecy prompts the Christians in Antioch to “provide help for the brothers and sisters in Judea.” Our second encounter with Agabus is in Acts 21:10 where he binds his hands with Paul’s belt, as a speech-act, and declares “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.’” It is an accurate warning, it steels Paul’s resolve, and he sets his face for Jerusalem.

It is this form of prophecy that I recognise today. Some would assert that prophecy of this sort is now only expressed as preaching and exposition of Scripture. I don’t disagree that preaching is often prophetic, but I don’t apply the same restriction. Certainly Agabus was doing something different than delivering a sermon.

What I do see are members of God’s people who are moved in a prophetic way to *speak truth, guard values, and provoke movement*. Oftentimes (but not always) their ministry is exercised through insights, understandings, and knowledge that

are also ministries of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it is a prophetic word for the whole church or for a congregation. A lot of the time it is for a person or family, and the spiritual insights express a profound and personal care in God's heart for the people who are being addressed.

The thing is, of course, that like every exercise of every gift in the church, it is done by fallible people. I have come across prophetic people (in the broadest sense) whose passion has turned into anger, bitterness, or even self-protective apathy. I have come across prophetic people in this narrower sense, who have acted impulsively, immaturely, and without due care. But I have also come across flawed evangelists, preachers, and pastoral carers!

Sometimes prophets get it wrong. And this informs the second part of your question: How do we weigh prophecy?

Firstly, we must recognise the final step in my movement from broad to narrow. There is one more sense in which we use the word "prophecy" and that is with regard to **AUTHORITATIVE PROPHECY**. This is, as you allude to in your question, related to the authority of Scripture.

In the Old Testament God ordains certain people to act as Prophet (with a capital P) to his people. Like every prophet, they speak truth, guard values, and expect movement. In the sense we mean it here, however, these things come with the weight of divine imprimatur. The truth that these prophets spoke was of such weight, that they came to be recognised as authoritative instruction to God's people, and applicable outside of their original context. Their utterances were proven by accuracy, adversity, and consistency; they were true, they were often true despite the resistance of the people who were meant to hear them, and they were consistently true. Take a look at Elijah and Elisha (in 1 and 2 Kings) and the written-down prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the rest. You will find a consistent exhortation based on the

promises of God and the identity of Israel as God's covenant people.

Any other form of prophecy that does not heed this authority, therefore, is suspect. Ultimately, such "prophecies" are a rejection of God's promises and the call of the covenant, and end up being a rejection of God himself. I don't mean the sort of times when a "prophetic word" is given and it's a little bit haphazard and not quite holding the sword of God's word by the correct end. I do mean the sort of times when we hear "prophetic" words that seek to place us over and above the Scriptures, rather than under them to be shaped by them. This is not fanciful. I have heard people say "the church wrote the Bible, the church can rewrite it." More gently, but perhaps more insidiously, I have heard people exhort that to step away from the Bible is to embrace a positive trust in the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Such an exhortation is not only self-defeating and self-serving, (it asserts that we cannot trust the Holy Spirit to talk to anyone else, including those who came before us in the biblical era), but cannot avoid undermining the (historic) promises of God, and our identity in Jesus as God's covenant people. Such things are, by definition, false prophecy.

Beyond assessing prophecy by the authority of Scripture, however, it comes down to common sense. Each of us ministers according to the diverse gifts of the Spirit. Each of us started off immature and green, and (hopefully) we have grown in maturity, capacity, and ability. Young prophets need to be guided, just as new pastoral carers, and apprentice preachers. That guidance is not only about things like technique, but about deeper things of identity: a pastoral carer needs to identify when they are risking codependence, a prophet often needs to discern between godly zeal and the churn of their own brokenness. We give more weight to a seasoned, mature prophet, and generous attention and care to those who are first stepping out in faith to offer a word. We embrace all with a

caring, loving, edifying community which desires everyone to grow in gifting.

For my part, I have appreciated when people have called me out on my own brokenness – it was motivated (usually) by a desire to see me heal and grow. In turn, I always try to keep an open door with prophetic people. Sometimes, having received “a word”, I might even say “I’m not sure you’re right, can you go back to God and seek more insight.” Or I might say, “I think you’re holding some truth there, I wonder if you need to hold it some more until God releases you to speak it, and shows you what to do.” Or I might say, “I think you’re catching a glimpse of something, but you need to go through some of your own fire before you can fully grasp it, or have the authority to speak it.” Hopefully, at the right time, these are constructive things!

Prophecy best works when the prophet is in “in the family.” There they have the freedom to speak prophetically, and the context in which it can be weighed up, clarified, and responded to. I have seen big meetings set in one direction, suddenly shift as a gentle but powerful word was shared.

Again, it’s common sense: The mature prophets I know have been through the fire, they have had their edges knocked off, and you can see the fruit of the Spirit in them as well as the prophetic gift. Younger prophets tend to catch the big picture (“God is calling us to love!”) and the more mature prophets begin to get a track record of well-hearted Jesus-honouring specific accurate words.

And this is how I weigh controversial prophecies about things like Brexit and Trump. Is it lined up with Scripture (e.g. are they blessing what cannot be blessed, trying to trump the Bible with their own agenda)? Are they speaking gently, from maturity, or grandstanding out of brokenness? Is the word hope-filled or fear-mongering, even if it is a “hard word”? Is it a word from them alone, or do I see the “family” moved? Is

there accountability and relationship and a willingness to “let it go” and weigh it again? These, I think, are questions of common sense more than anything else.

In the end, which was the point of the original blog post, we need our prophets. We need them in our world and society. We need them in the church. We need them in our lives. We need God’s word.

Q&A: Can we ignore the pagan background of Lent and its other difficulties?

Sarah asks:

Hi Will,

I have always been muddled by Christian encouragement to observe the man-made tradition of Lent. I have been asked plenty of times over the years what I am giving up for Lent and I have been asked to teach about Lent in Sunday School and declined. I have attended wonderful teaching sessions that have been given the title “Lent Bible School” and I have been to Lent prayer meetings. This year I had a mailing from a brilliant Christian publisher promoting a book called “Lent devotions for the whole family”.

I have never been directly taught that I must observe Lent by Christian leaders, but perhaps even more confusingly, I have been encouraged to think about my personal response as if observing Lent is assumed. It obviously retains its place on the church calendar despite the Reformation and my experience

is that it is referred to in passing when we are entering Lent, as if we all know what we should be doing with it.

So, my question is can we ignore the background of:

- 1. The paganism at the root of Lent from Christianising pagan traditions;*
- 2. The penance involved in confessing sin to a priest to receive absolution on Shrove Tuesday and be shriven by a sinful man rather than God; and the penance also behind self-denial for 40 days.*
- 3. The debauchery associated with partying before Lent seen in Mardi Gras, and, although not celebrated like Mardi Gras in our culture, a feasting before self-denial;*

Why are we so casual about all of this? Can we reject what is bad and leave something good? Is it a matter of personal conviction?

Or do we have a duty to actively teach that Christians should avoid anything to do with Lent, to reject the traditions of men?

I'd be really interested to hear what you think. Thank you.

P.S. So you have an idea of where I'm coming from, here is a summary of my concerns (feel free to cut this if you publish my question!) [I've included some of these by referring to them in my answer -Will]

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My last opportunity to be a part of a pancake race, in 2018, was (ironically perhaps) affected by inclement weather...

Thanks Sarah,

As always, really appreciate your questions. Let me respond to your questions from the last to first.

First up, can I agree with you that Lent can seem a little weird. In human terms, it's about a big party on a Tuesday, some inconsequential "self denial" for a few weeks, before suddenly being allowed to eat chocolate again! What on earth has this got to do with how I follow Jesus? It's similar to the experience I had as an Australian on my first Christmas in the UK: what on earth does a bunch of sweets stuck into an orange with toothpicks have to do with the birth of this world's Lord and Saviour!? We're a weird bunch, us Christian folk, sometimes.

But to turn to your comments. You conclude by asking the foundational question of whether we should actively avoid Lent because we ought to "reject the traditions of men."

My general response to this general question connects with general idea of whether we take a "proscriptive" or "prescriptive" view of Scripture. (It's actually a false dichotomy, but I'll get to that in a minute). A *prescriptive* view is, basically, "unless the Bible commands it or explicitly allows it, it is wrong." A *proscriptive* view

is, basically, “unless the Bible prohibits it or explicitly commands avoiding it, it is fine.”

The excesses of the prescriptive view (e.g. not being allowed to sing any other songs except biblical psalms, because anything else is not prescribed) are obvious. When Spurgeon writes (in the supporting material you gave), “When it can be proved that the observance of Christmas, Whitsuntide, and other Popish festivals was ever instituted by divine statute, we will also attend to them, but not until then,” he’s pushing a prescriptive barrow, at least to some degree. In the end, I find this hermeneutic unhelpfully inapplicable to the real world, and I don’t see the New Testament writers, or Jesus himself, treating Scripture (our Old Testament) in this way. **Just because Lent isn’t commanded (or even mentioned) in Scripture (and therefore, necessarily, derives from traditional and cultural practice alone), doesn’t mean it’s bad!** This is my first point.

We might ask, though, whether there is a *proscription* in Scripture that applies. You refer to “traditions of men” and this phrase connects us to Colossians 2:8 – “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on *human tradition* and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.” (NIV). Paul’s concern here is the *misuse* of human traditions, as a means of mediating God’s favour (“Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.” – Colossians 2:16, NIV). If we elevated seasons and traditions to this level of importance, we are, in effect, denying (rather than trusting), Jesus: “These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” (Colossians 2:17, NIV). **In this regard, any *insistence* on observing Lent is, in my mind, wrong, it is *proscribed*.** This is my second point. If someone doesn’t observe Lent (which, to be honest, has included myself on many a year), that does not mean they are

doing anything wrong or “lesser.” Your provided quote from Spurgeon has it right, perhaps: “We ask concerning every rite and rubric, ‘Is this a law of the God of Jacob?’ and if it not be clearly so, it is of no authority with us, who walk in Christian liberty.” We have *liberty, freedom* as to whether or not we observe Lent.

However, as something of a post-post-modernist (read that carefully!), I’m wary of the propositionalism behind the proscriptive-prescriptive dichotomy. Applying Scripture is not so much about distilling it down to clinical propositions, it is about being caught up into the narrative of God’s action in the world. Unlike a postmodernist, I don’t hold that this narrative is ultimately determined by my own experience of it, which locates truth in myself. Rather, God, the foundational “Other”, has acted in this world, has spoken his Word of Truth, ultimately in Jesus, as recorded in Scripture, and the history of our planet is moved along according to his story. This connection with divine narrative has both proscription (so that I don’t set my course against the movement of Jesus) and prescription (it compels me to seek the face of Jesus and follow him actively). It doesn’t work if I don’t trust him. It’s into this mix that I look at Lent and wonder if it is cutting across God’s story, or getting me closer to the current, so to speak. Most human traditions do both in some way, and we must exercise discernment.

Which brings me to your next questions (as I work through them backwards). You ask “Why are we so casual about all of this? Can we reject what is bad and leave something good? Is it a matter of personal conviction?” **To which I say yes, it is a matter of personal conviction. And yes, there is some good that we can accept amidst the bad that we must reject** (I’ll unpack that below). This is my third point.

As to why we are so casual about it... well, in my experience I find that the Christian propensity to be casual about much of what we do is, sadly, not to be underestimated. I long for us

all too long for more depth, more truth, more awareness of God (cf. Ephesians 1:17). Regrettably, most church dynamics reward exploration of the stable shallows of human experience rather than the rocky, lively, depths.

Let's conclude, then, where you begin, by looking at Lent itself.

Firstly, I'm not surprised that there is an intermix of Christian with pagan themes in the tradition. Following the kenotic dynamic of Jesus himself (Philippians 2:1-11) – i.e. the mode in which God *comes to us* – at our best we have always gone to others. At our best, we bear witness to Jesus in, with, and through the language and culture of those to whom we go. Of course, this doesn't mean an unquestioning embrace of all that is around us, but it does mean speaking into it, reinterpreting it, turning its witness towards Jesus. Paul's use of the "Unknown God" in the pagan tradition of the Athenians is the sort of thing I'm talking about (Acts 17:16-34). The fact that Lent, connects with Easter, connects with Passover, connects with lunar calendars, connects with Spring and fertility (Lent literally means the season in which the days LENGTHen) doesn't surprise me, or overly concern me. As with each season, moment, or event in the world around us, our job (and our joy) is to discern how it can best bear witness to the new life of Jesus.

Secondly, I'm not surprised that there are connections within the tradition related to Roman Catholicism, in both its pre- and post-reformation forms. Lent is part of the liturgical calendar that is embraced by a number of traditions. And yes, there are connections with some Catholic practices which I, personally, don't find helpful. I agree that "use up all the food before Lent, have a party, and then make sure you go get your forgiveness from the priest" is both real in folklore, and unedifying for the gospel. But the question is whether these unedifying things are integral to the tradition, or simply misuses of it, and I lean towards the latter. Every

generation must discern when its traditions still hold positive meaning, and when they must be allowed to fade away. In the history of Protestantism, many traditions have been done away with, but Lent has (by and large) persisted, and that gives at least some indication that it can have some positivity for the gospel when not misused.

For myself, I find Lent helpful. The aspect of the tradition I draw upon is twofold:

1) The tradition in the early Church was to have baptisms on Easter Day. The candidates were led through a season of catechism (teaching about faith in Jesus) and this culminated in a season of fasting before the day of celebration. I therefore use this season to be deliberate about catechesis, both for myself (I hope to reinvigorate a discipline of personal bible study) and for my church (where I might often offer a course or sermon series that is designed to dig a little deeper).

2) The tradition is that Lent is a season of *fasting*, and in this way it is *penitential*. This doesn't mean *penance* in the sense of alleviating guilty, but it does mean renewing and reflecting upon my *posture* before God. Have I become self-confident, worrisome, fearful; have I excused my own sin, rather than dealing with it? This is not dour or morose, although it can be solemn and sometimes painful; it is a desire to be deepened, stretched, extended. It's a desire for growth. It's a season for finally dealing with stuff that should have been dealt with before. Psalm 139:23-24 says the following, and it is the essence of what I use Lent for. I put aside the distractions and anesthetic practices (this year, it is giving up the netflix binge!) which I hide behind, and ask Jesus to continue to deal with me and sanctify me:

*23 Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.*

²⁴ *See if there is any offensive way in me,*

and lead me in the way everlasting.

Of course, this could be done at any point in the year, but here is a season which not only acts as a reminder and stimulus, but helps me share that journey with my brothers and sisters as we coordinate the rhythms of our year. There is no compulsion (there is freedom), and it is in accord with the “Lenten tradition” in its best sense, serving gospel purposes. I “do” Lent.

What disheartens me the most is not that Lent exists as a season, nor some of the bad things that have attached to it; rather it is when we use it to dive into the shallows of popular Christianity and play the game of mere lip-service: The giving up of chocolate, “because it’s Lent”, rather than for any deeper engagement with our walk with the Lord; the use of Ash Wednesday as an excuse for a party the night before. Shallow Christians do that, and shallow churches promote it that way. It’s at that point the tradition becomes an idol – the use of God to worship an empty practice, rather than the use of the practice to worship God. Maybe, at that point, the prophetic act is to give up the tradition totally; I think you are alluding to this, and it is entirely valid. As for myself, at this point, I’d rather capture it for Jesus, and have it speak again of the deep work of Word and Spirit that is so needed in the hearts of his people.

Thanks for the question.

W.

Q&A: How would you unpack the Bible step by step to show God's big picture, that grace is a free, unmerited gift?

Sarah asks:

Hi Will,

My Mormon friends believe that they are saved by grace after all that they can do.

One of their former presidents said: "One of the most fallacious doctrines originated by Satan and propounded by man is that man is saved alone by the grace of God; that belief in Jesus Christ alone is all that is needed for salvation".

How would you unpack the Bible step by step to show them God's big picture – that grace is a free, unmerited gift? (And importantly doesn't lead to licentiousness, which is what they have been taught.)

I've talked about the purpose of the OT law, that all our works are like filthy rags, that Jesus takes my sin and gives me his righteousness. But I think I need a logical structure that walks them through it rather than my scatter gun approach. Your thoughts would be much appreciated!

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

Hi Sarah,



Intriguing question! A good place to begin our thoughts is in Ephesians 2, especially verses 1-10.

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

There are two reasons to ground ourselves here:

1) There's some explicit language about salvation by grace alone. Firstly, the language is about the *necessity* of

grace: Verse 5, "...it is by grace you have been saved...", verses 8-9, "...For it is by grace you have been saved... not by works, so that no one may boast." Secondly, the language is about the absolute *extent* of grace, i.e. that grace does more than provide the means for our rescue, the grace of God is what actually does the rescuing. This is found in the depths of our predicament: Verse 1, "...you were dead in your transgressions", Verse 3, "...by *nature* deserving of wrath". It is also found in the *agency* of God: Verses 4-5, "*God* made us alive with Christ", Verse 6, "*God* raised us up...", Verse 10, "We are *God's* handiwork..."

2) The context of this passage connects us with a bigger picture; Paul sees the work of Jesus on the cross resulting in the creation of a "*new humanity*" in which the great "mystery" of the Gospel is the inclusion of all people in the covenant promises made to Israel: that "the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise..." (Ephesians 3:6).

It's this second point that perhaps guides us to a framework for the story of grace: It is best to tell the story of God's covenant; his *promises* to his people, and especially to Abraham. Perhaps it might go something like this, as my own feeble attempt:

1) The human predicament is one of rebellion against the ways of God, and God's response is always both righteous deserved judgement and undeserved gracious provision. Consider Genesis 1-11; the fall itself, the murder of Abel, the hardness in the time of Noah, the attempted usurpation of God by human empire at Babel. In each part the judgement is obvious, but also consider how God clothes Adam & Eve, protects Cain, puts a rainbow in the sky etc.

2) By grace, therefore, the ultimate provision of God is his intervention in human history. In our historical

record, this intervention is grounded in the life of a man called Abram (later Abraham). This intervention is fundamentally *gracious* and it is received by *faith*. There is nothing particularly special about Abraham. He was weak and old. Any righteousness he has derives not from his works or moral fortitude, but as a gift bestowed (“credited”) by God and received as Abraham trusted him. *Consider Genesis 12 and how God’s gracious involvement with Abraham naturally follows from the rebellion at Babel. Consider also Romans 4:1-3*

3) By grace, God binds himself to Abraham in a covenant, i.e. a promise. Chief among these promises is that “*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*” This is the intervention, the promise of salvation; a new heaven and a new earth. *Consider Hebrews 11:8-10 and consider Abraham’s vision with that of the new heavens and the new earth in Revelation 21*

4) By grace, God guides Abraham’s children towards this blessing. He protects his chosen people, he saves them from Egypt, and instructs them on how they can be true to the promise: “This is how you embrace this grace! This is how you bless the families of the earth.” In this way, the Law itself is grace, and there are times when we get a glimpse of that blessing. But mostly, what we see is the rejection of the promise, a refusal to trust God; the law continues to point to the promise and so reveals how far away God’s people are from it. *Consider: the entire OT.*

5) By grace, God provides a true Son of Abraham; he is not only of Abraham’s flesh, but also a Son of the Promise as well; i.e. he has faith after that of Abraham. He takes responsibility for his people; by meeting the just requirement of their transgression he deals with their *separation* from the promise. And he *receives* the fullness of the promise – the renewal of life, resurrection itself. *Consider: John 3:16 and Romans 4.*

6) By grace, the promise to Abraham is now fulfilled. The blessing of salvation now applies to all the “families of the earth.” It applies as we all (both Jew and Gentile), dead in our sins, are “raised up with Christ.” We are all made heirs of Abraham, children of his promise. *Consider: Ephesians 2-3 (which is where we started).*

It's a narrative of salvation in which the defining agency is God, the defining action is his promise, and the basis on which the promise applies to me is not me and my faithfulness, but Christ and his faithfulness. When we add anything else to this dynamic, we actually disavow it; Embraced by Jesus, I am child of Abraham and so called to live by faith as he did. Any attempt to prove myself worthy is a disagreement that the heart of salvation is promise; and if I do not share in the promise, I am not a child of the promise; I do not share in Abraham, or in the fulfilment of all that God bound himself to do; I do not share in Christ, and I am not saved. In short: *grace is essential, and absolute.* It is necessary for salvation, and cannot be added to.

Does this lead to licentiousness? As Paul would say, “*Absolutely not!*”. To deliberately sin is also to depart from the way of promise; how can licentiousness bless all the families of the earth? Grace abounds, I am still raised with Christ; but that grace calls me to holiness.

I hope that helps. Having just gone back and read what I have written, it seems terribly insufficient. In the end, what you are doing is proclaiming the gospel. Can I encourage you as you take your question to the Scriptures? Have you noticed how many of my references have been to the book of Romans, especially chapters 4-6? It's a good place to begin, and perhaps to take your Mormon friends.

Image credit: NASA/JPL-Caltech/Univ. of Virginia

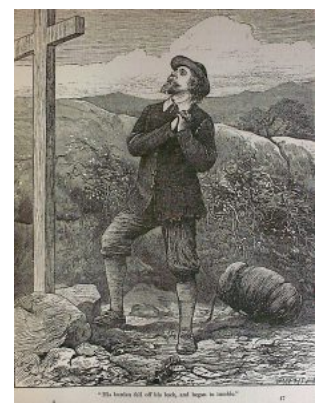
Q&A: Does a desire for forgiveness mean faith?

Anonymous asks:

If someone claims to be without faith, yet morally knows they have done something “wrong” due to our God given in built moral compass (even if said person chooses to not believe that God gave them the compass) and is looking for forgiveness, does that mean they have faith...? I guess they will only feel forgiven if they realise who they must submit to, which leads them to faith...? It is almost like our inbuilt ability to continually fall short of the inbuilt compass leads us to God. Smart design. Seek and you shall find.

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This question has come in response to our latest sermon series in the evening at St. Nic's. Thank you for it. You've put forward something very interesting. Let's unpack it a little, explore this hypothetical person's situation, and look to see where faith can be found...



You talk about someone who “morally knows that they have done something wrong.” This is an experience that is common to all people (excluding a sociopath or two) and is simply the operation of our conscience. Theologically, we can find the roots of conscience in our identity as image-bearers of

God, *and* in the loss of innocence grasped by the eating of fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But our conscience doesn't depend on faith, it is simply a part of who we are as human beings. Similarly, a pricked conscience doesn't necessarily lead to faith, or anything else in particular. We all know what it means to deaden our conscience, and harden our hearts.

However, there is also an experience that we might describe as "being convicted of sin." This something different to feeling guilty about something, it is about an awareness of a fractured relationship with our maker. It can feel like dread, but always has a sense of hunger to make it right, even if we are at a loss for words and aren't sure of what we can do about it. It's what is happening when the *psalmist* writes, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." This is what is happening when Peter witnesses Jesus at work and *cries out* "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"

The big question is whether this sense of conviction is an aspect of faith. I think I'd like to turn it the other way around and consider how faith is present in the conviction of sin. After all, you cannot understand yourself to be disconnected from God's holiness if you don't have some sense of belief that God exists, and that he is holy. The longing for forgiveness is a longing for restoration of relationship, and for me, that is faith:

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

True conviction of sin, a ministry of God's Spirit awakening our own, draws us to God in search of his grace, even if it is on our knees. And, as you say, "seek and you shall find."

The conundrum with your hypothetical person is that we see

something of an existential wrestle: Clearly he is looking for forgiveness from someone, yet has “chosen to believe that God has not given them their moral compass.” It’s a tension that can’t last! Either what we are seeing is simply the operation of conscience, or it is true conviction and will find its end. In the meantime it is existential disequilibrium, and while it may take some time for it to resolve, that is what will happen. As you say, it’s a smart design.

What is clear is that it presents an urgency to be ready with the gospel, in word and deed. If someone is seeking the path of reconciliation, we show them Jesus, and bear witness to how he has overcome the power of sin with newness of life. Conviction finds its end in Jesus as forgiveness and assurance, and that is very much the stuff of a life of faith.

Q&A: What is the significance of Jerusalem being the capital of Israel?

Anonymous asks:

My question is the significance of Jerusalem being made capital again. My reaction is yay, hallelujah!!

In Nehemiah 2 an Arab was amongst those ridiculing Nehemiah and his helpers and in verse 20 saying they have no right to any property in Jerusalem and no share in traditions.

My feelings run along side as God gave His people the Jews, Jerusalem.

It's all in end time prophecy but I'm seriously out of date with the latest happenings.

Your enlightenment would b so appreciated. Tks so much.

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Thanks for the question. The topic is loaded with some political energy, so I'm hoping to tread carefully.

I need to begin with the significant caveat that I have no expertise in international politics, and certainly not in Middle Eastern affairs! My limited understanding of the current situation leads me to the following initial thoughts.

1) There has not actually been any significant change in the actual status of Jerusalem. As far as I am aware, the nation state of Israel has pretty much always claimed Jerusalem to be its capital, even if the administrative centre is in Tel Aviv. The complexity is that the displaced Palestinians also claim Jerusalem as their capital. What *has* changed is that President Trump has announced that the US will *recognise* that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, and implement this through the relocation of the US embassy. While this is controversial, it is not a surprise, and it is an action that has been mooted by other US presidents in recent years.

2) Personally, I don't think my reaction can be "yay,

hallelujah!" Irrespective of its justifications or otherwise, this is a *provocative* action on President Trump's part. It seems pretty clear that the socio-political situation in and around Jerusalem is highly anxious. The cliché of "powderkeg waiting for a spark" seems to fit. Bloodshed is possible. Diplomacy and care is needed. While I'm not in full disagreement about the US recognition of Jerusalem, (the "recognition of reality" line has some merit), I'm not sure President Trump has pursued the way of peace in this situation. Certainly, many other leaders, including the UN, have decried the escalation.

3) Before I get to the theological aspects (see below), it is clear that Jerusalem is a conundrum of competing claims, all of which have at least some degree of validity. I understand that the Palestinians, through no fault of their own, *have* been displaced from a city and a land in which they have lived for generations. I understand that the Jewish community has also experienced displacement (and worse!) in the last century, and that they have genuine ethnic links to Jerusalem and the land also. I also suspect that there is some significant "proxy activity" going on as the tensions in Jerusalem connect with the power plays of broader political forces. Injustice is the order of the day, and it's a difficult thing to wade through.

Theologically, I can only begin to approach this issue by noting the *differences* between the people and nation of Israel that we see in the Bible, and the contemporary nation and state of Israel in modern politics. The biblical notion of Israel is that of a covenant people (a people of *promise*), descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (who was later, personally, called *Israel*). They are a people defined by these roots of divine promise, and the subsequent foundation of divine rescue as they are brought out from Egypt under Moses, and called by the Law towards the goals of the original covenant. This identity reached something of a zenith under

King David, who established Jerusalem as a political capital in about 1000 BC. His son, King Solomon, responding to the Mosaic law, established Jerusalem as a *holy* city, building the temple that encapsulated all that the Mosaic tabernacle had beforehand. It became the tangible and symbolic manifestation of God's promise and presence.

The modern state of Israel, while having clear ethnic and historical roots in this theological understanding, can be considered in contrast: It is a "Jewish and democratic state", and, as I understand it, the "Jewish" part is understood *ethnically* not *religiously*. As a political entity there is very little that sets it apart as being particularly shaped by an Abrahamic, Mosaic, or Davidic identity. Its establishment as a nation state lies in post-war turmoil and involves the actions of Zionist activists, and the political machinations of Western powers, leading to a formal recognition in 1948. Even among orthodox Jews, there has been controversy about the form and formation of modern Israel. I understand that Haredi Jews, for instance, consider the re-establishment of Israel without the Messiah to be an act of presumption and rebellion against God.

The presence of Jesus in salvation history also impacts our understanding. The person of Jesus interacts with the base shapes of theological identity – Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic – in a way that cannot be ignored. In particular, we understand that Jesus *fulfils* these covenant. Jesus fulfils the Abrahamic covenant – the family who was "blessed to be a blessing" has brought forth its ultimate blessing. Jesus fulfils the Mosaic covenant – he obeys the law and receives the covenant blessings, sharing them with his people as he covers them sacrificially. Jesus fulfils the Davidic covenant – he is the "big-M" Messiah, the anointed King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Jesus is the Temple, where the presence of God is manifest. Jesus is the Promised Land, in which we have "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." In his risen life, Jesus

extends this promise to all those (Jews and Gentiles alike) who would follow him, put their faith and trust in him, and so receive his Spirit and be counted amongst his people.

What this means, is that when I read stories in the Old Testament, such as the one you mention where Nehemiah rebuilds Jerusalem and faces his opponents, I understand the story in the light of Jesus. Nehemiah, in verse 20 of chapter two, says to Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it." For me, I see a man, grasping the promises of God and moving forward in faith and favour in order to see the covenant promises manifest once more. I see the powers of this world, that would frustrate God's purposes, put rightly in their place. This is, with bricks and mortar, the same prayer as "Thy Kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Nehemiah wants to re-establish Jerusalem, and I draw from that a desire for Christ's rule to be made more manifest.

This is something that the New Testament imagines as the "New Jerusalem." And President Trump's declaration does not particularly enter into it!

Nevertheless, I am not intending to completely spiritualise the reality of Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Physical locations are important. Ethnic identity is important also. And these are particularly so when they are filled with such historical and theological meaning. For myself, I turn to Romans 11, where Paul speaks not only of the inclusion of the Gentiles into the promises of God, but mourns the apparent intransigence of his own people, the Jews. Yet he is full of hope, that even in their stumbling they are fulfilling their calling:

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has

experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written:

*'The deliverer will come from Zion;
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.
And this is my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.'*

(Romans 11:25-27)

The calling on Israel and Jerusalem is to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49:6). That calling is caught up into the Messiah, Jesus, who has embraced it, fulfilled it, and continued it by “grafting” the Gentiles of faith into the covenant people of God. But that doesn’t mean the calling has waned. It remains Jerusalem’s calling – to shine a light, to bless the world, to truly be the city of peace. For that to happen, for the “end” to be reached, Jerusalem doesn’t so much need the proclamation of a President, but the ministry of her Messiah.

Come, Lord Jesus.