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## Living by the Book

Antony Billington on the place of the Bible in the nurture of Christian identity and discipleship

# Living by the Book

Antony Billington, LICC's Head of Theology, looks at the role of Scripture in the formation of whole-life disciples...

## CHRISTIANS

are a people of the book – God's word – and we want to live by the book. But how do we do so, particularly when some parts of it seem obscure or irrelevant? How does Scripture speak to my life right now: with the annoying colleague at work or the needy child at home, in the checkout queue or on the sports field?

Alas, the greatest problem to be overcome might be ourselves. In *Eat This Book*, Eugene Peterson writes about the temptation to replace the triune God who reveals himself in Scripture with the unholy trinity of 'my Holy Wants, my Holy Needs, and my Holy Feelings'. The potential danger in a desire to make Scripture 'relevant' is to make ourselves

the centre around which it must spin; we become the primary focus rather than the *God* who speaks through it, the *Spirit* who inspired and illumines it, and the *Christ* to whom it witnesses.

As it happens, then, the most appropriate starting point for thinking about how Scripture 'disciples' us is not to look at ourselves, but to begin with God himself.

### Founded on Scripture

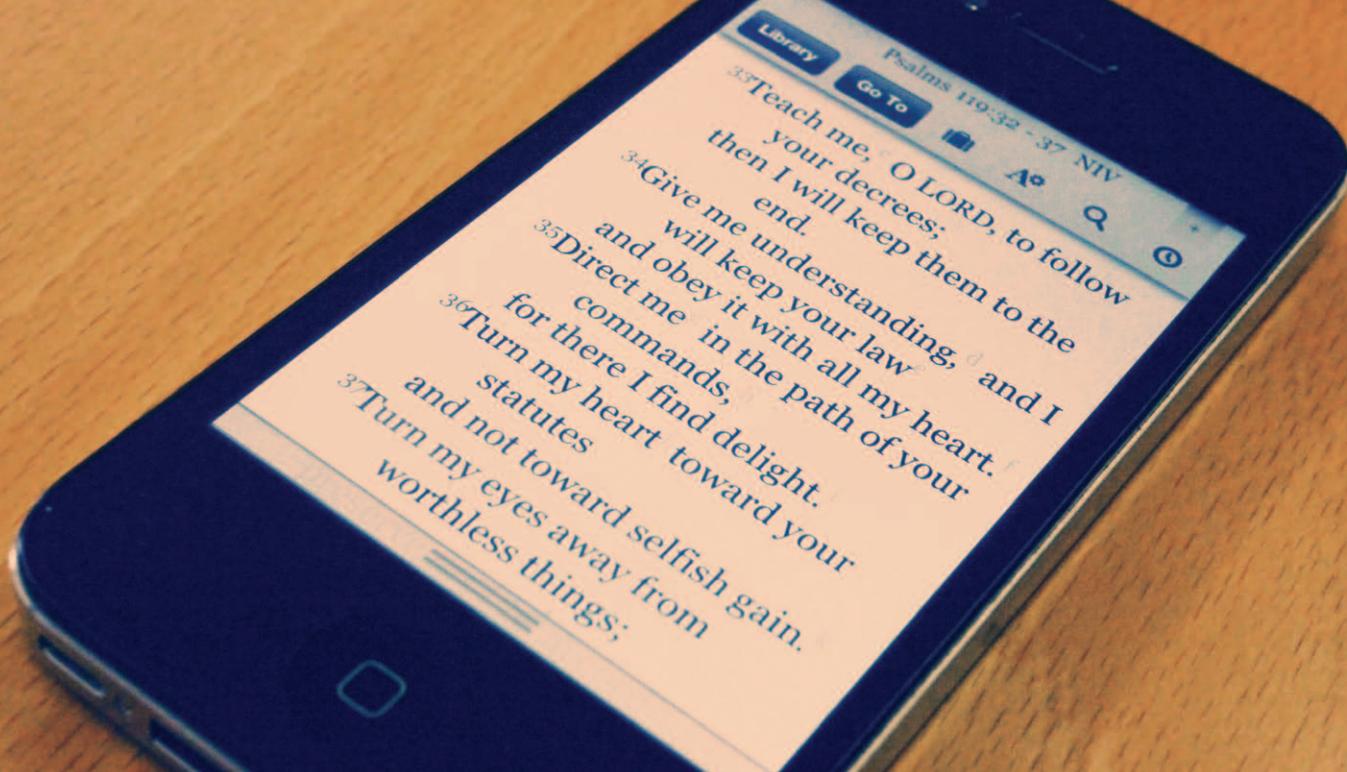
In the first place, Scripture is *God's word of the covenant*. As the designations 'Old Testament' and 'New Testament' suggest, Scripture itself

functions as a covenant document – that which ratifies the promises made by God and which regulates the faith and practice of the people of God. More than a mere vehicle for 'information' or 'answers', Scripture is bound up with God's work of salvation in which the Spirit joins us together in one body, and through which God shapes us into the image of Christ. The Bible is not only a sign and seal of God's commitment to us and to all creation,

but that through which the covenant Lord speaks and acts – in word and in deed – as he makes promises, blesses, rebukes,

**'The potential danger in a desire to make Scripture "relevant" is to make ourselves the centre around which it must spin'**





commands, warns, and encourages us.

Secondly, Scripture is *God's word about Christ*. God's covenantal promises and acts come to their climax in Jesus. Jesus himself was clear that the Scriptures testify about him (John 5:39, 46-47); he expounds Scripture to the travellers on the road to Emmaus in such a way as to show he cannot be understood apart from the Old Testament and the Old Testament cannot be understood apart from him (Luke 24:13-35). Hence, a goal of our reading is to be a people whose lives are focused on the promises of God now fulfilled in Christ, the one who stands at the heart of the gospel. Scripture, as the authoritative witness to Jesus, is the authoritative word for the church's life.

Third, then, Scripture is *God's word to the church*. When we engage with Scripture, we don't do so as isolated individuals but from the perspective of the believing community. The Protestant emphasis on the priesthood of all believers and the right of all to read Scripture for themselves was never intended to detract from the significance of the church or its tradition.

Belonging to the body of Christ has implications for how we read and appropriate Scripture today – locally (in our home churches), globally (with brothers and sisters in Christ around the world) and historically (in the light of

those who have gone before us). It is in the community of faith that Scripture is preached and practised. Being discipled through Scripture, then, is bound up with prayer and worship, baptism and communion, as God works through his Spirit to build up the body of Christ.

Jonathan Leeman writes of God's words 'reverberating' in the church – in preaching, prayers, music, conversations – and then beyond:

'The church building doors should open and God's words should echo out the doors, down the street, and into the members' homes and workplaces. The reverberations of sound that began in the pulpit should eventually be bouncing off the walls in dining rooms, kitchens, and children's bedrooms; off gymnasium walls, cubicle dividers, and the insides of city bus windows; through e-mails, text messages, and Internet pages.'

A covenant-focused, Christ-centred reading of Scripture forms the gathered community that is then sent into the world in his name. Dispersed during the week, we testify – in word and deed – to the presence of God's reign in the world, bearing witness to what God has done in Christ.

### Formed by Scripture

So, the Bible is not merely a witness to how God has acted in the past, through Christ and for his people, but the means by which he relates to his people today, and through which he calls us to follow his way.

We see this clearly in Psalm 119, an extended prayer. Like Psalm 1, Psalm 119 opens with the word 'blessed'. As there,

so here, the way of blessing is to 'walk according to the law of the Lord... to walk in his ways' (119:1). To walk with the Lord is to walk in step with his word. We don't merely watch God from a distance; we follow in his way, the way of blessing.

But, lest we think this comes about by our achievement, the way of blessing is also a way of grace. The word 'covenant' isn't used in Psalm 119,

but it doesn't need to be: the idea lies behind every verse. The key terms used for God's word – laws, statutes, precepts, promises, etc. – all presuppose the covenant relationship made by God with his people. Life comes from the 'unfailing love' of the covenant Lord (119:41, 88, 149, 156, 159). Only because of his grace do we walk in his ways.

**'Scripture, as the authoritative witness to Jesus, is the authoritative word for the church's life'**



What is true of the Psalms is the case with other biblical genres too. Scripture ‘disciples’ us in how to think and feel and live: laws disclose his will for how we should relate to him and to each other, and how our life together should be ordered; narrative tells of his gracious plan being worked out through the ages and our part in it; wisdom shows what it is to fear him in all areas of life; prophecy challenges us to fulfil our responsibilities as his covenant people; gospels proclaim the centrality of Christ in his plan of redemption, providing a kingdom-and-cross-shaped pattern for living in the process of doing so; letters instruct those who are ‘in Christ’ to grow up in him as we serve each other and live in the world; apocalyptic trains us in how to hope as we look forward to the renewal of all things.

In all these ways and more, God himself – through Scripture – nurtures Christian identity and discipleship as we follow his word in faith and obedience. Reading Scripture as disciples, and being disciplined by Scripture, is not about mastering a blueprint for life, let alone picking and choosing passages according to felt needs. What’s required is not merely competence in reading and handling biblical texts but the acquisition of virtuous habits that lie at the heart of good relationships sustained over time – trust of the other, careful listening, openness to challenge, willingness to change. In short, for disciples, reading Scripture is an act of love.



‘God himself –  
through  
Scripture –  
nurtures  
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identity and  
discipleship’

But the relationship founded on God’s covenant word is maintained through that same word. Line by line, he praises the

Lord, makes requests, describes his trouble, confesses his sin, makes vows, asserts his trust – but always with the word of the Lord as the means by which the relationship is sustained and nurtured. Moments of lament, moments of struggle, moments of asking for leading, moments of love and

commitment are worked out through the word, addressed to the Lord of the word.

Psalm 119 shows how the Psalmist seeks to become holy not merely by understanding Scripture, but by learning to walk a path, to have his affections and desires redirected, and to find delight in doing so. It’s not that isolated verses

from the Torah are ‘applied’ or ‘made relevant’ to particular situations, but that the Psalmist is shaped by God’s word – in such a way that what is emphasised is the transformed character of the one reading.

As such, then, Psalm 119 – and the Psalms more generally – affect not only how we pray, but how we live. As we immerse ourselves in the atmosphere of the Psalms, and adopt to their climate, we familiarise ourselves with how God communicates through Scripture, and how Scripture ‘schools’ the lives of those who read it appropriately.

**Further Reading/Listening**

*Bible Delight: Heartbeat of the Word of God*, Christopher Ash (Christian Focus, 2008).

*Reverberation: How God’s Word Brings Light, Freedom, and Action to His People*, Jonathan Leeman (Moody, 2011).

*Eat This Book: The Art of Spiritual Reading*, Eugene H. Peterson (Hodder & Stoughton, 2006).

*Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God*, Timothy Ward (IVP, 2009).

*Gospel-Shaped Discipleship: Engaging with the Word* (CD) – Antony Billington on the nature and interpretation of Scripture. **This CD is supplied free to Friends of LICC with this issue of EG. For details of how to become a Friend of LICC, see back cover.**

# What 'John' Did

It looks like something bad is about to happen. How does the disciple respond? Mark Greene meets a man with bottle and spirit...

**'JOHN'** works for a drinks company – not a soft drinks company, but a hard drinks company. He's a Christian, and convinced that God called him into the job. One day, 'John' finds himself on a business trip in the Far East. One of the ways that business is done in the Far East is to go out drinking together at the end of the day. John has rules about this. He goes with the team and he doesn't get drunk. Now, in the Far East, the kinds of places executives go drinking almost always feature beautiful hostesses. Some are there to serve drinks, and some offer rather more. John has rules about the kinds of places he goes to. And he sticks to them.

One evening, his team is out with some suppliers and John realises that one of his colleagues has taken a real shine to one of the hostesses who is particularly luminous. As the evening proceeds, John grows more and more concerned that his colleague, a married man, will proposition her. But what can he do? The place is buzzing, there are suppliers and colleagues and the hostesses... but his heart aches and he fervently prays: 'Lord'.

A little later, John finds himself in the facilities. By coincidence, perhaps, his colleague is the only other person there. So, as they are facilitating, John turns to him and says: 'Are you having a good evening? I can see you have some decisions ahead of you. As your friend,

I would encourage you to make sure that the decisions you make tonight are the same as those you'd make tomorrow.'

Now, that is some sentence. And although John is a bright, articulate man, he's in no doubt that it came from the Spirit (Mark 13:11).



Ten minutes later, the colleague left the club with the hostess in tow. John's heart ached more. A little later, John left the club and went back to his hotel room and got down on his knees by his bed and prayed and prayed. A couple of days later, it became clear that his colleague had, in fact, propositioned the girl...

However, she had told John's colleague that she wasn't that kind of hostess, but asked if he'd be interested in a long-term relationship. He then stayed up until 3.00am talking to her, much of it about her sorrow because her boyfriend had left her.

Now there's a thing. The man who wanted to use this woman as a prostitute becomes her pastor. And maybe he learned more about how wrong his impulse to sleep with her was by having propositioned her than if he had simply left the bar at 11.30 pm. He learned that a hostess in a bar can have a life beyond that bar, that a hostess in a bar could be a woman with a heart that's tender, a heart that can be broken, a woman with hopes and dreams for her own life...

But what about John?

Now there's someone who loves their colleague/neighbour as a whole human being. And is confident that God's ways are good for other people, and cares enough to intervene. There's someone who believes in prayer, who knows how to call out to God in the maelstrom – just as Jehoshaphat did in the middle of the battle (1 Kings 22:31-33) –

when there is nothing he can do himself. There's someone who is confident in God to act – even if he can't think how. There's someone who also knows how to pray in the quiet place. There's someone who asked others to pray for that trip before he went, someone who has involved the people of God in a frontline of mission that they themselves will probably never be in.

Bottle, spirit, prayer and the support of God's people – it's a mighty potent cocktail.



# Dispatches for the Frontline

As well as heading up LICC's Imagine project, encouraging churches to become whole-life disciple-making communities, Neil Hudson co-leads a church in Salford, Manchester. Here he reflects on how having the frontlines of his congregation in view affects his sermon preparation and preaching...

**I'VE** been preaching for so many years that it's hard to imagine life without the relentless rhythm of weekly sermon preparation and delivery. My preaching task sits within my wider intention that our local church will be a whole-life disciple-making community, equipping people to live well for Christ on their various frontlines. And that has to affect *everything* I preach.

The church is fairly ordinary – an average-sized congregation, mixed ages, lots of young families at the moment, though fewer teenagers, with most people having only ever known this church as their church. It's in Salford, Greater Manchester, with all the mix of challenges and opportunities that are there.

A few weeks ago, the task was to lead people into the passion of the Last Supper in Matthew's Gospel. These were my concerns:

- ❖ What is there to say that's not been heard a thousand times before?
- ❖ How does this connect with people's everyday lives?
- ❖ This salvation story is the biggest story in the world and the most necessary story for everyone. But how could I make sure that my preaching didn't descend into a personalised, privatised version of the gospel?

Alongside the text, the most important factor to consider in my preparation is

the people who will listen to the sermon – my local congregation. Because I'm away from home so often, I'm always in danger of losing touch with the everyday realities that are being faced by these people. So, every Friday morning I meet with my colleague, Mary, who, alongside other tasks, has primary responsibility for co-ordinating pastoral care. This is a crucial meeting, where she brings me up to date with all that's happening on the different frontlines among our congregation: the people dealing with significant problems amongst their own families; those dealing with employment disputes; others who are helping friends deal with tragic bereavements; the tired parents with young children, prone to



picking up every passing bacteria, resulting in the sleep of the whole household being disrupted etc. etc...

This is the context for this sermon, and for all my sermons – people desiring to live as whole-life disciples, struggling with everyday situations. And each Sunday my job is to help them re-engage with a bigger world: the world of the Bible, the world where God is seen again and a world where God's presence is to be encountered again. So I know that if we are to be serious about disciple-making, I have to help people enter into the story (the Last Supper in Matthew's Gospel in this instance) themselves – to be reoriented as disciples by seeing how this story is eternally true. And this shapes the process of my preparation.

These, then, are my intentions:

- ❖ I don't want merely to 'apply' the sermon, offering in-depth knowledge and then showing how it works in today's world as some 'additional component'. I want to help us re-enter the scene, bringing with us our struggles and hopes.
- ❖ I want to help us grasp the significance of it being a Passover meal, to recall the moment that the powers of Egypt realised that they were not in control, and the people of Israel were liberated. In front of me will be people who are facing real injustice at work. I want them to see that these 'intimidating powers' will not have the final word; Jesus will.
- ❖ I want us to understand the disciples' fear of betrayal. They'd seen so much, and learnt so much. Some of us listening in Salford in 2011 know that it could have been us. We can be so overwhelmed with our situations, our predicaments, that if God doesn't deliver our hopes we can be tempted to trade the Jesus of the Gospels for one of our own making, or simply abandon him altogether.



## Pointers for Whole-Life Preachers

For preachers and teachers wanting their sermons to contribute to the formation of whole-life disciples, Neil suggests you keep the following questions in mind during your preparation:

- Why are you preaching *this* sermon *this* week?
- How did the text help its original hearers live faithfully as disciples?
- What are the frontlines that your people are facing?
- How will this sermon equip them for the week ahead?

❖ I want us to feel the force of the meal – the meal prepared by Jesus, and shared with those he has called to himself. The meal of substitutionary love.

❖ I want us to see Jesus offering his own life for our sake. This is Jesus offering his brokenness to us so that our brokenness would be healed. His self-offering is the means by which we can live – confidently and wholly.

During my preparation I read Tim Keller's reflections in *King's Cross* and am moved by his attempt to explain what substitutionary love looks like. He suggests that anyone can love someone without needs; there is little cost involved and much to gain. But to love someone with needs is always costly. He gives the example of parenting, a good one for my context since we have many young parents. Children need love, affirmation and care, and for that to happen parents have to make the sacrifice of time and attention. The life of the parent becomes restricted as the child grows into maturity. But if this price is not paid, the child will pay the cost in years to come. It's them or us.

On Sunday, as I preach the sermon, I look out from the front of the church and see Hannah, standing at the back, rocking her baby who has been crying – demanding her attention without being able to explain the reason. And

I realise I'm seeing a small example of substitutionary love on the everyday frontline of parenting.

Will the reality of the sermon connect with people as they hear it? Will it help them live faithfully? Will it encourage them to face up to their situations hopeful at the prospect of fruitfulness? I'm not the best person to judge, but I hope so.

Sermons can take us into the text, but they are only part of the drama of Sunday morning services. So, on the day, the sermon segues into us taking our place in the customary queue to receive bread and wine – the tokens of grace around which we construct our lives. We shuffle to the front of the church and receive them

from members of the congregation we know so well, reconnecting this story of grand salvation with the relationships of faithful, ordinary saints. And we walk back, to the circumstances of joy and challenge – back to work, back to families, back to empty houses, but with the sustaining taste of a bigger story.

And next week, there will be a different text. But there will also be different contexts. People will have heard the results of medical tests; work situations may have either been resolved, or become more frustrating; families will have had a chance to talk. And there will be news in the local community of people being shot in the local pub, more council cuts, and royal weddings. And there will be another need to hear the word that makes sense of all this...

'This is the context for this sermon, and for all my sermons – people desiring to live as whole-life disciples'

# Dispatched to the Frontline

So, your church leader is making a conscious effort to preach with your frontlines in view, but what difference does it actually make?

**EG** invited three members of Neil Hudson's congregation to share their perspective on hearing whole-life preaching...

Meet the Congregation (well, three of them!)



**Hannah Maylor (HM)**

Hannah has recently become a first-time mum to her lovely little 4-month-old boy,

Reuben, and so is currently a full-time mum/housewife.



**Mary Causer (MC)**

Mary is a part-time, paid co-leader in Neil's church, who has oversight for pastoral care and mission. She manages the new church café and is a Chaplain to Greater Manchester Police.



**Matt Tregilgas (MT)**

Matt is a Chartered Surveyor, managing property for an energy firm (so part-office, part-

out on site). He is a husband and a father to two children – Hannah, aged 3 and Naomi, aged 1.

**EG:** *What's it like listening to a sermon that's been prepared with the everyday frontlines of the congregation in mind?*

**HM:** Listening to Neil's sermons is really useful. They are not dry or overly theological, but relevant and easy to apply to normal life, whilst being challenging and explaining the Bible in a really modern, significant way. They demonstrate that Christianity is relevant to life today.

**MC:** I feel really positive about being part of a church that is concerned about me outside of a Sunday and outside of how much time I serve as part of the community. As one of the pastors, I have the privilege of being invited into people's everyday lives, both in their struggles and joys. Listening to stories of how people have engaged with the sermon and then applied it is always encouraging.

**MT:** Five years ago, my wife and I joined Salford Elim Church and straight away there was a very clear message that we are challenged to be Christians not only in church, but also at 9.00 am on a Monday morning, or wherever it is that we meet the world. It was really refreshing to hear this, and Neil genuinely wants to equip people to be Christians in their personal context. The sermons that Neil prepares usually give an insight into the verses to which he refers, and with his knowledge he is able to provide a bit of 'flesh' to help us understand the background to the passage. He also has a great gift for relating this to today's society.

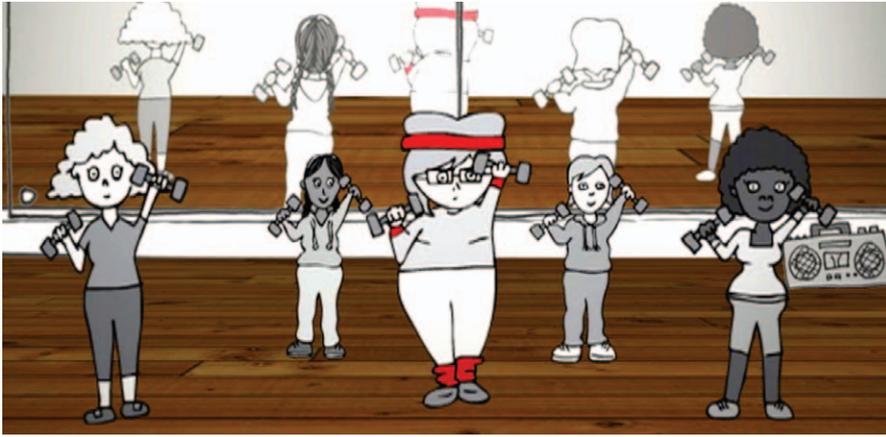
**EG:** *Can you share a recent example of sermon content striking you as directly relevant to an issue confronting you in your everyday life?*

**HM:** As a new parent, most of my thinking and challenges stem from that area of my life at the moment. Neil has already mentioned his recent reference to the sacrifices that we have to make as parents for the well-being of our children. In addition, the sermon at a recent dedication service really made me think about the fact that how I act and react to situations will teach my son so much. I must be an example to him; how I shape myself will also shape him.

**MC:** Recently, we dedicated one of the babies in our congregation. Neil started the service with that John Lewis advert that follows a young girl growing up through the different stages of her life. He made the point that, given how quickly they grow up, it's so important that we help our children to see beyond the surrounding culture, that we help one another grow up in the context of shared faith and understanding of what it means to belong together, and that as both biological and spiritual parents we don't have to do this alone.

This spoke directly to me about the struggle my daughter is having at present, coming to terms with something life-changing; we are not alone in this. As a disciple, my call is to not worry, but to remember that Jesus asks that I respond, and live, well.





**MT:** One that strikes me is a recent sermon about temptation – Jesus tempted by the devil in the wilderness. Church is not the place where we are tempted; we are tempted at work, in the pub and everyday. Neil said something that was very simple, but also very effective for me: he stated the sentence, ‘When I \_\_\_\_\_, I am tempted to \_\_\_\_\_, and we were invited to fill in the blanks ourselves. It only takes seconds to fill those in for yourself and really understand those areas that need addressing in your own life.

**EG:** *What, in your view, should the best sermons do?*

**HM:** I believe that the best sermons should challenge you where you are at, give you the tools to face your situation in a more Jesus-like way, and encourage you to be a living testimony to who God is, to all those that you come into contact with.

**MC:** I think they should provoke me to want both to understand and apply more of what the Bible teaches. This, in turn, should help me explain my faith and live it out before others in a real and authentic way.

**MT:** In my opinion, the best sermons should hold your attention, be based firmly on the Bible, be relevant to people’s lives, challenge you to improve, and be clear and concise enough for you to be able to leave with the main point.

**EG:** *And what, in your view, is the worst thing a sermon can do?*

**HM:** In my opinion, sermons should never condemn or judge anyone for their situation, as this could cause people to turn around and walk in the exact opposite direction from God and the church.

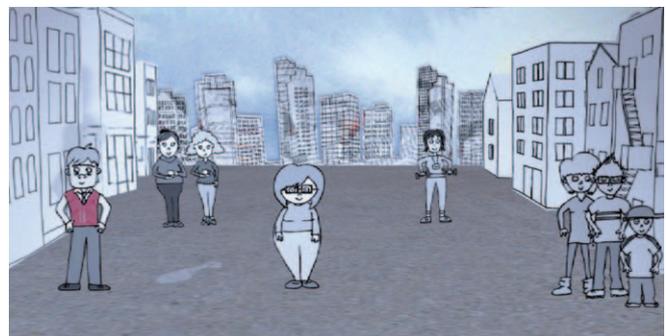
**MC:** Leave me thinking ‘what’s that got to do with life as I know it?’

**MT:** The worst thing a sermon can do is jump around the Bible, using many different verses, not have a clear message and cause my mind to wander – thinking about what I need to do that afternoon, for example. Also, the worst sermons can’t be summarised in response to someone asking what it was like.

**EG:** *Reflecting on his own sermon preparation, Neil writes:*

*‘I don’t want this sermon to give the impression that real situations don’t matter, nor that God will always rescue us from challenging circumstances. I want it to be another moment in the ongoing formation of disciples; that, as they have to deal with these challenges, they find that they are being changed into a “Jesus-shape” rather than misshapen by bitterness or, worse, despair.’*

*How, in your view, does this translate into what you hear preached each week in Salford?*



**HM:** Sundays, for me, are often a reminder that God cares about the small details – that he really is bothered about those things we may feel are insignificant, if we would just let him in. He wants to help us through the ups and downs of our everyday lives. Neil’s preaching affirms that God loves us too much to leave us where we are spiritually, mentally and physically, and that the challenges that we face, and the way that we react to them, are often the catalyst for that change.

**MC:** Normal practice for us as a congregation is to respond to the question, ‘so, what are you thinking?’ at the end of each sermon. It gives space for folks to think out loud, to grapple with the text and some of the application. Some will go away thinking ‘I wish I could have responded like that in that heated discussion’, others, ‘oops, blown it again’, and still others, ‘at last I can see that this formation stuff is actually working in me’. We are all on the journey of formation, one that is being helped by what we hear on a Sunday.

**MT:** I am constantly challenged by Neil’s sermons. They seem to strike at the heart of those issues that cause problems in life. Looking back over the past five years, I can see where I was and how much I have matured as a Christian, and this is a direct result of the regular teaching and support I receive from Salford Elim Church.

*The illustrations on pages 6, 8 & 9 are taken from the forthcoming Imagine small group DVD resource, Life on the Frontline, due winter 2011.*

# What has the Bible Ever Done for Us?

Far from being culturally irrelevant, the Bible might just be the single most influential text in British political history – so argues Nick Spencer, author of the newly published, *Freedom and Order: History, Politics and the English Bible...*

**THIS** year marks the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Version of the Bible (KJV). Although widely praised for its impact on our language, literature and culture, the KJV – indeed the Bible itself – is equally widely ignored when it comes to our politics. The Bible may have inspired Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, and Milton, but it did little to influence their political masters.

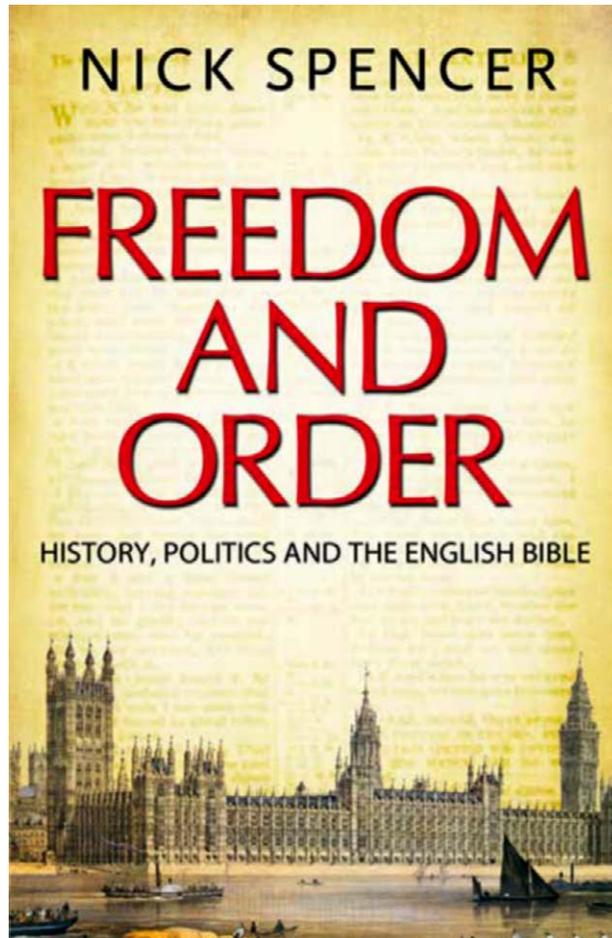
Nothing could be further from the truth. The Bible has been central to our national politics from the earliest days, and can lay good claim to being the single most influential text in British political history.

This is not to say that it has been the *only* influence on our political life, or that it has always been a benign influence. Rather, it is to claim that, just as it is impossible to appreciate English literature fully without recourse to the Bible, so it is impossible to understand our politics.

Moreover, it is also to claim that many of the political ideas we accept as self-evident today owe a great deal to biblical Christianity. Take political equality, for instance. What *earthly* reason is there for a ruler to surrender himself to the same laws as his subjects? It seems so obviously right to us now, but it is far from obvious to a whole host of North African dictators, and was

certainly not obvious to the innumerable kings and emperors in the past.

The Western political tradition was profoundly influenced by the idea, most pithily expressed in Deuteronomy 17:14-20, that the law was over *everyone*.



The king of Israel could command huge authority as God's anointed, but ultimately was under the same judgement as everyone else. 'Whether you will or not', the scholar Alcuin warned King Ethelred as early as the eighth century, 'you will have him [God] as a judge'.

Linked to this is the idea of political *responsibility*. Christian kings were kings, at least in theory, by God's grace, not by their own right, still less by force of arms. Accordingly, it was only by fulfilling their divinely-mandated duties that they became *legitimate* kings. These duties included judging justly, securing peace, defending the weak, and protecting and advancing the Christian faith – a duty that led the church down some very grim *cul-de-sacs*.

Overall, such duties oriented political power towards the 'common wealth' of the people. This was not, of course, the same thing as democracy. No one imagined that the people over which a king ruled were the source of his authority. Nevertheless, the fact that God's grant of political authority was dependent upon the king's ability and willingness to discharge the responsibilities of justice, peace, protection, and faithfulness was significant as it pointed, in the long run, in the direction of a contract between ruler and ruled. The direction of travel was set early on; thus, the monk Aelfric in a Palm Sunday homily in the early tenth century:

'no man can make himself king, but the people has the choice to choose a king whom they please' – an extraordinary idea for the time.

When it came to democracy itself, Christian thinkers had a patchy relationship. What happens, for example,



if the people choose ungodly rulers or ungodly laws? Yet, it is unlikely that democracy could have taken root, certainly in the way it did, without the Bible and, in particular, without William Tyndale.

Tyndale himself was about as far from a democrat as it is possible to be. Nevertheless, by translating the Bible into accessible English and insisting that even the ploughboy should be able to read it, he helped create what was, in essence, a spiritual democracy, which, in the long run, came to underpin the political one. If God considered even the humblest man competent to judge for himself the means of eternal salvation, later radicals argued, and government was simply the means of temporal salvation, it followed that government should involve the people in the formation of its laws.

So, we have equality, responsibility, democracy... and toleration. Tolerance is not normally associated with Christian history (for good reasons). Yet it was first articulated as a political virtue not only by biblical thinkers but for biblical

reasons. At first it was mainly Christians on the social periphery, such as early Baptists, who argued for toleration, but in time the idea received its fullest and most impressive voice from the great Christian

philosopher John Locke. ‘Toleration [is] the chief characteristic mark of the true Church’, he wrote in his influential *Letter* on the subject, before going on to locate the justification for tolerance in the life and teachings of Christ himself.

Last, but clearly not least, we might also mention the very idea of England, and Britain, as a political entity. When Pope Gregory sent his missionaries to the English people in 597, the English people did not exist. Conceiving of them as a single unit and sending his clerics to them was

**‘Many of the political ideas we accept as self-evident today owe a great deal to biblical Christianity’**



Nick Spencer is Research Director at Theos, the public theology think tank: [www.theosthinktank.co.uk](http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk)

His new book, *Freedom and Order: History, Politics and the English Bible* is published by Hodder & Stoughton.

You can hear Nick speak on the subject at LICC on Monday 27 June – see back cover for details.

a momentous move on Gregory’s part, causing one recent historian to observe that ‘the English owe their existence as a people, or at least the recognition of it, to the papacy.’ Much the same thing happened 1,100 years later when Protestantism helped forge a common identity following the Act of Union in 1707. In the words of the historian Linda Colley, ‘Protestantism was the foundation that made the invention of Great Britain possible.’

Faithful reflection on biblical teaching thus lies behind many of the basic axioms of our political life. As mentioned above, we should not let this deceive us into believing that the Bible has always been on the side of the political angels. It has not. It is sobering to recall that one of the reasons why the abolitionist cause was so explicitly biblical is that there were serious and committed Christians on the other side of the fence who argued *for* the slave trade on biblical grounds.

But we should not allow acknowledgment of this chequered past to shame us into downplaying or ignoring the enormous and, on balance, overwhelmingly positive impact that the Bible has had on British political life.

It is impossible to tell whether British political life would have generated its commitment to equality, justice, responsibility, toleration, democracy, and cohesion without the Bible. But it is clear that its commitment to them was grounded in biblical thought. It may well be that we will maintain our commitment to such political virtues if the nation ever jettisons the Christian convictions that have, however imperfectly, underpinned them for the last 1,500 years. But it would be a brave or perhaps a complacent person to suggest that it will necessarily be so.

## Coming Up at LICC

### What has the Bible Ever Done for Us?

Monday 27 June, 6:30 - 8:30pm at LICC

Christians and atheists alike are happy to praise the Bible for its literary and cultural impact on our national life. But we fall strangely silent when it comes to its political impact.

Yet the Bible, as Nick Spencer will argue in this evening event, is the single most influential document in British political history. Although far from the only influence, and not always used by the political angels, the fact remains that if we want to understand where the British commitment to equality, freedom, democracy and toleration come from, we need to dig around in the biblical roots of our political history.



Nick Spencer is Research Director at Theos, the Public Theology Think Tank. He is the author of a number of reports and books, most recently *Freedom and Order: History, Politics and the English Bible* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2011).

Cost: £7 (concession £5) – includes light refreshments

Book your place online ([licc.org.uk](http://licc.org.uk)), call 020 7399 9555, or send an email to [mail@licc.org.uk](mailto:mail@licc.org.uk)

This event will be streamed live on the Internet. To participate from home, go to <http://www.livestream.com/liccltd> at 6.30pm on 27 June.

### Introducing the LICC Work Forum

Tuesday 5 July, 6.45pm at LICC

Mark Greene will be presenting *Work: The Missional Opportunity*, and he'll also be introducing *The Work Forum: A Missional Response*. Canapés, cheese and refreshments will be served.

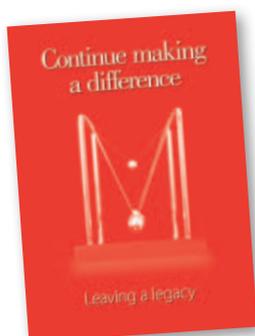
The evening is designed to encourage you in your own calling in the workplace, or in serving others in that context, and to help you to see fresh possibilities for how God might want to use you where he's placed you. It will also set out the vision for *The Work Forum*, a strategic, innovative initiative with the potential to increase significantly the depth and breadth of Christian contribution to the contemporary workplace.



Do join us – to hear the vision, offer insight, pray and consider supporting it financially.

There is no charge for this event, but booking is essential. To book your free place, call 020 7399 9555 or email [stephanie.smith@licc.org.uk](mailto:stephanie.smith@licc.org.uk)

### Legacies: A Lasting Difference



You can help to ensure that the work of LICC can continue and flourish by remembering the Institute in your will. For full details of how to leave a legacy to LICC and so enable us to keep on helping God's people to make a difference, please call 020 7399 9555 to request a legacy pack, or email [mail@licc.org.uk](mailto:mail@licc.org.uk)



## TOOLBOX – See Life Differently, Live Life Differently

*'Incredibly valuable...'*

*'Really made me think differently about mission and the community we work in...'*

*'I'm now much better equipped for reading popular culture and explaining it in light of Scripture.'*

*'The course brought together a Christian worldview alongside an exploration of our culture as it is, and enabled us to see that culture as it supported or rebelled against the foundational values of the Christian faith.'*

These are just a few examples of the praise heaped on LICC's Toolbox course by recent delegates. The next course in engaging with the Bible and contemporary culture runs from 12-16 September. Places are already filling up fast, so be sure to book yours now!

To request a free brochure or to book your place, please call 020 7399 9555. Alternatively, the course brochure is available to view on our website, where you can also reserve your place – [licc.org.uk/engaging-with-culture/licc-toolbox](http://licc.org.uk/engaging-with-culture/licc-toolbox)

## With a Little Help From our Friends...

As demand for LICC's vision and expertise grows, so too does our budget. We are currently reliant on donations from individual supporters for half of our required funding each year. More than ever, we wish to encourage all those who are able, to become Friends of LICC – to give regularly to the costs of keeping the Institute's work going and spreading. A regular gift of just £10 per month can make a huge difference over the course of a year.



To become a Friend of LICC, simply complete the form enclosed with this issue of *EG* and return it in the Freepost envelope provided. Alternatively, you can download the form from our website ([licc.org.uk/licc-friends](http://licc.org.uk/licc-friends)).

## Connecting to LICC

If you would like to find out more about LICC – how to receive our mailings, or our ever-popular weekly emails, 'Word for the Week' and 'Connecting with Culture' – please call us on 020 7399 9555, email [mail@licc.org.uk](mailto:mail@licc.org.uk) or write to us at the address below.



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