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JOHN GRAYSTON

The Bible and Spirituality: the Decline in Biblical Literacy among Evangelicals and the Future of the Quiet Time

The decline in familiarity with Scripture in evangelical circles is a growing cause for concern. John Grayston analyses the reasons for this trend, places the evangelical 'quiet time' in its historical context, and suggests ways in which personal engagement with Scripture might be recovered and encouraged.

Driving home a few months ago and listening to *Quote, Unquote* on Radio 4, I was disturbed, but not unduly surprised, that the panel (which included a presenter of religious programmes on British TV), when confronted with the phrase, 'Go forth and multiply', thought that it sounded 'vaguely biblical' but could go no further; there was no suggestion that this was because it was not a biblical phrase! Later in the same programme, during a discussion about the origin of the proverbial phrase 'hiding one's light under a bushel', no one mentioned the Gospel narrative. It is impossible to avoid the conclusion of Margaret Killingray: 'It is reasonably clear that the general level of biblical knowledge in the population of Great Britain has fallen. Many people do not know the stories, parables, tales and sayings that made up the cultural inheritance of ordinary people, say, 50 years ago.'¹

It is not only those outside the church who have major gaps in their biblical knowledge. The following piece of research relates to the situation in the USA but conversations with Bible College staff in this country reveal a similar situation:

For the last four years, the Bible and theology department at Wheaton College in Illinois has studied the biblical and theological literacy of incoming freshmen...

When asked to complete a test in which a series of biblical events must be placed in order, our students returned surprising results. One-third of the

1 Margaret Killingray, *Encouraging Biblical Literacy*, Grove Books, Cambridge 1997, p 5.

freshmen could not put the following in order: Abraham, the OT prophets, the death of Christ, and Pentecost. Half could not sequence: Moses in Egypt, Isaac's birth, Saul's death, and Judah's exile. One-third could not identify Matthew as an apostle from a list of NT names. When asked to locate the biblical book supplying a given story, one-third could not find Paul's travels in Acts, half did not know that the Christmas story was in Matthew or that the Passover story was in Exodus.²

Causes of decline

A number of reasons have been suggested for this decline. Assessment of these will depend to some extent on our own experience and theological position.

Credibility

Critical scholarship has been with us for many years but only more recently years have its results been more widely disseminated. Television programmes, newspaper articles and sensationalist paperbacks have popularized the idea that the Bible cannot be trusted. While most churchgoers will be largely unaware of the issues surrounding source criticism, they may have heard that Moses did not write the Pentateuch, that there were two, three, or more 'Isaiahs', and that Paul did not write all the letters attributed to him. Evangelical scholarship has moved on the critical issues. Thirty years ago, for example, it was assumed among Evangelicals that Daniel was written in the sixth century. John Goldingay now assumes a second century date and asks 'How could Evangelicals ever have thought anything else?'³ Many evangelicals will still respond, 'Quite easily and with very good reason', but the diversity does not disguise the shift. For many who do not have a detailed understanding of the issues the result is an undermining of Scripture.

Authority

It is now generally accepted that we live in an age which no longer respects any sense of ultimate or absolute authority. The title of the Manic Street Preachers album, 'This is my truth tell me yours' has become something of a cliché in describing the relativism of postmodernity. The all-encompassing, over-arching narrative which gave meaning to the whole of life has been replaced with the local or personal narrative which gives meaning to *my* existence or that of *my* community.

With this world view have come a range of new approaches to interpretation: hermeneutics of suspicion, reader response theories, deconstructionism and the like. While these may open up new possibilities for understanding, the way in which such thinking impacts on the general reader raises further questions. If the sense is determined not by the author but by the reader or the interpretive community, if our understanding of the text is simply the product of a particular culture or ideology, we no longer have any reason to trust the text. The academic debate may – or may not – be fruitful: the fallout at a more popular level has undermined the conviction that the Bible speaks with authority.

2 Gary M. Burge, 'The Greatest Story Never Read', *Christianity Today* (August 9, 1999).

3 John Goldingay, 'What are the Characteristics of Evangelical Study of the Old Testament?', *Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol LXXIII (2001), p 105.

Relevance

When I conduct workshops on Bible reading I often ask what the obstacles are; relevance always comes high up the list. Even established Christians find it hard to see how an ancient text, often in unhelpful translations, which features alien customs and which addresses questions which no one in the twenty-first century is asking can have significance for their daily lives.

Many churchgoers find little connection between the preaching that they hear and the world in which they live. Sermons have been dry and academic and lacking in application or human interest or they have become a collection of anecdotes which fail to engage with the text of the Bible. No bridges are built between the world of the Bible and the world of the reader, the horizons are as far apart as ever and no windows of the imagination are opened to enable the hearer to see new possibilities or explore the transforming power of the Word. If the Bible is not seen to touch on the questions which are raised in everyday life, it is not surprising that many have turned away from it.

In other circles, the Bible has been used to raise expectations which have subsequently been disappointed. Irresponsible application can, for example, give rise to expectations of divine intervention at every eventuality; these, when unfulfilled, leave people feeling disillusioned and they then turn from Scripture feeling that it has failed them at a point of need.

Lifestyle and reading

There is some question as to how far reading patterns have changed in society. A recent piece of research undertaken for the Publishers Association suggests that people are reading as much as ever but also notes that reading declined during secondary school and is only resumed in middle or in later life especially in males. For many people reading is limited to technical material associated with their job, a quick glance at their newspaper and a blockbuster when they go on holiday. If reading in general is in decline it is hardly surprising that personal Bible reading is also in decline. Of the latter there seems little doubt. All the Bible reading agencies report decline in the sales of notes. Independent surveys indicate that relatively few churchgoers read the Bible from one week to the next.

Pressures of modern lifestyle also mean that the patterns which evolved in the nineteenth century and served us well until the middle of the last century, no longer work. The normal pattern of personal devotion in the middle of the last century was to rise early and spend time in Bible reading and prayer and this formed part of the instruction given to new Christians. It becomes difficult increasingly to maintain in the face of long working hours, long distance commuting and family pressures.

In the public arena the Bible has been marginalized. It no longer features in public debate or in the educational system as it once did, further diminishing both confidence and knowledge.

Church life

Charismatic renewal has brought a new dimension to church life. The emphasis on worship, the opportunity for members to become more involved in the ministry of the church, a renewed sense of dependence on God, and a new energy for evangelism are to be welcomed. But the sense of immediacy and excitement experienced in corporate worship has not always been carried through into personal spirituality. This has left many with a sense of anti-climax when they come to their private devotional life which is then abandoned.

The reaction against a legalistic approach to personal Bible reading has also contributed to its decline in some renewal circles. One leader of a charismatic fellowship has told me that in the early days they moved away from emphasis on personal Bible reading on the grounds that it smacked of law rather than grace and legalism rather than the work of the Spirit. Although never universal this has left some without any commitment to regular personal Bible reading

Increasingly contact with the Bible has occurred in small groups. These have much to commend them in terms of building fellowship, encouraging mutual support and in helping members to relate the Bible to contemporary issues and personal lifestyle. The disadvantage has been that there is often no careful exegesis and inaccurate and ill-conceived ideas gain a wide currency and are mistakenly thought to be biblical.

There has probably been too much subjectivity in our interpretation in preaching, small group studies and devotional aids – if what matters is what the text means to me now, the text itself becomes less important than our lives and our problems: ‘The devout predecessor of deconstructionism is that reading of the text which insists that what the Bible says to me, now, is the be-all and end-all of its meaning; a reading which does not want to know about the intention of the evangelist, the life of the early church, or even about what Jesus was actually like. There are some strange bedfellows in the world of literary epistemology.’⁴

The roots of evangelical spirituality

The practice of regular ‘Bible’ reading and prayer is as old as Scripture itself. Joshua is enjoined to meditate on the Book of the Law day and night (Joshua 1:7), an example followed by the Psalmists (eg Ps. 119:117). It appears to have been Jesus’ own practice – his familiarity with Scripture suggests that it must have formed a significant part of his personal spiritual life. Paul encourages the Colossians to ‘Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly’ (Col. 3:16) and extols the virtues of Scripture to Timothy (2 Tim. 3:14-17).

There are hints that the Church retained this emphasis. Chrysostom, for example:

Hearken ye, as many as are worldly, and have the charge of wife and children; how to you too he commits especially the reading of the Scriptures and that not to be done lightly, nor in any sort of way, but with much earnestness....

⁴ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, SPCK, London 1992, p 60.

If ye will not any other, yet get you at least the New Testament, the Apostolic Epistles, the Acts, the Gospels, for your constant teachers. If grief befall thee, dive into them as into a chest of medicines; take thence comfort of thy trouble, be it loss, or death, or bereavement of relations; or rather dive not into them merely, but take them wholly to thee; keep them in thy mind.

This is the cause of all evils, the not knowing the Scriptures.⁵

Douglas Burton Christie writes of the desert fathers that ‘although for many of the monks the primary source of the Word was what they heard at the weekly *synaxis*, there is evidence that a good number also practiced [sic] reading in their cells, which implies that at least some of them had books there.’⁶

Augustine’s (354-430) conversion was the result of the injunction to ‘take and read’. The Rule of Benedict (480-543) emphasizes regular reading both corporately and individually. At some point in the Benedictine tradition the practice of *lectio divina*, with, in its classical expression, the fourfold pattern of *lectio, meditatio, oratio* and *contemplatio* emerges.

The stage is set for Wycliffe and later for Tyndale with his oft quoted, ‘...I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost.’ With the Reformation emphasis on the private interpretation of Scripture, the wider availability of printed Bibles and increasing standards of literacy the way was open for the development of the patterns of personal spirituality that we have come to associate with evangelical piety. Richard Baxter encouraged ministers to make Scripture knowledge an integral part of their pastoral work: ‘If our common ignorance were thus banished, and our vanity and idleness turned into the study of the way of life, and every shop and every house were busied in learning the Scriptures and catechisms, and speaking of the Word and works of God, what pleasure would God take in our cities and country!’⁷

Wesley’s class system emphasized personal prayer and Bible reading as well as the group activity. Charles Simeon (1759-1836), in many ways one of the founding fathers of evangelicalism, made it the core of his practice: ‘Mr Simeon invariably rose every morning, though it was the winter session, at four o’clock; and, after lighting his fire, devoted the first four hours of the day to private prayer, and the devotional study of the Scriptures.’⁸

This was not simply a matter for the clergy; Simeon’s contemporary Hannah More (1745-1832), a popular dramatist and one time socialite, also had a pattern of regular personal Bible reading and prayer: ‘Bible reading and prayer went together in her devotions. Read prayerfully the Bible could be “nutriment to the heart”, “an unerring line to ascertain our own rectitude” or “oil to the lamp of prayer”. A primary benefit of her own extensive study was a mental treasury of theological and biblical knowledge from which she drew material for meditation.’⁹ Towards the end of his sadly short life Robert Murray McCheyne (1813-1843)

5 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Colossians*, Homily IX (this version accessed at www.ccel.org).

6 Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, Oxford University Press, New York 1993, p 112.

7 Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, Chapter 3, Section 2, Part 1, Article 3 (this version accessed at www.reformed.org).

8 James M. Gordon, *Evangelical Spirituality*, SPCK, London 1991, p 102.

9 Gordon, *Evangelical Spirituality*, p 113.

produced his list of readings covering the Bible in a year – a list which is still in use.

These were the foundations of the Quiet Time which reached its prime in the first half of the last century. The founding of the Scripture Union in 1879, with its list of readings and its method which involved commencing with prayer, reading the text in an attentive manner, examining the text with the aid of certain questions and concluding with prayer provided one major stimulus. Some, for example David Parker,¹⁰ have seen the Scripture Union approach as an evangelical equivalent of the classical *lectio divina*. New Christians were encouraged to form the habit of this regular time with God: 'In order to grow properly certain rules must be observed for good spiritual health. First, you should read your Bible daily...If you fail to partake of daily spiritual nourishment, you will starve and lose your spiritual vitality... Prayer combined with Bible study makes for a complete and glorious life.'¹¹

This was the pattern of spiritual life which predominated until the last quarter of the last century and which in part gave rise to the higher levels of biblical literacy. This is not to say that everything was perfect. It could be ritualistic or legalistic. In some extreme cases it was little more than some spiritual talisman; I can still remember a fellow student rebuking me for missing my Quiet Time and assuring me in all seriousness that I would have a bad day as a result. It could be dry and academic. It led in some cases to a new form of Pharisaism, with rules kept but little personal change. Sometimes there was little genuine devotion.

At its best, however, this was a practice which nurtured Christian life, which provided the framework for a growing relationship with God, produced Christians with a distinctive lifestyle and engendered enthusiasm for local evangelism and overseas mission. It is instructive that the great period of expansion in foreign missions coincided with the flowering of the personal devotional life.

Why does personal Bible reading matter?

Christians encounter the Bible in several ways. The decline in biblical knowledge will therefore have multiple causes and reversing the decline will require action on several fronts. A revival of personal Bible reading could make a significant contribution but only in the context of broader change.

I want to suggest that we read the Bible for three main reasons: transformation, relationship, and information. In one sense these correspond to the volitional, affective and intellectual aspects of the human personality.

Transformation

This has probably, in recent years at least, been the most neglected in evangelical circles. We have majored on Scripture as a source of truth and have sometimes behaved as if it were only there as a means to our developing a systematic theology. The reading of Scripture, however, leaves us with the impression that God's primary

10 David Parker, 'Evangelical Spirituality Reviewed', *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 16 (1992), p 161.

11 Billy Graham, *Peace with God, The World's Work*, Kingswood 1954, pp 152-4, cited in Parker, 'Evangelical Spirituality', p 161.

concern is that we become holy (Lev. 19:2; 1 Pet. 1:15). This is both as our work and as God's work. Lev. 20:7f requires the Israelites to consecrate themselves but also underlines the fact that it is God who makes them holy. In this process of moral transformation, or to use the older word, sanctification, the word of God is central. Jesus' prayer for the disciples was 'sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth' (John 17:17). The word of God has creative power to bring about moral change. It does so by bringing about conviction and self-understanding (Heb. 4:12,13). This process can only happen in so far as the word is read, meditated on, and acted on (cf Ps. 119:9-11).

Relationship

One of the purposes, and one of the consequences, of Bible reading is to build relationships through a living encounter with God. 'Biblical literacy is not just a matter of academic study but a matter of the knowledge of the God revealed in the Bible's pages.'¹² In the act of reading we move beyond the text to encounter the author of the text – postmodern hermeneutics notwithstanding. To quote the old hymn: 'Beyond the sacred page, I seek thee, Lord; my spirit yearns for thee, the living word'.¹³ The development of this relationship is at one and the same time an intensely personal matter and something which takes place within the family of fellow Christians; personal Bible reading is therefore one of the essential factors.

Information

While building up a body of doctrine is not the sole, or perhaps even the main, reason for reading the Bible, it remains true that individual Christians need to have an understanding of what they believe. Living in a world of conflicting ideas, it is important that in our dialogue with people of other faiths and ideologies we can give a reasoned description of and defence for our convictions. We constantly need to bring our thinking to the touchstone of Scripture, so that it may be tested and refined.

These three elements are closely linked. Paul encourages us to 'be renewed by the transforming of our mind' (Romans 12:2). It is as we engage with Scripture at every level of our personality, both corporately and individually, that we experience growth towards maturity. If our goal is, as it must be, to become and to enable others to become mature disciples we will want to give a special place to personal Bible reading.

The way forward

This may not be easy. We will have to recognize that people are individuals and that one approach may not work for all. It is important to help people to devise patterns of personal spirituality which work for them. It will help if they can discover their own personal rhythm. While a daily reading is obviously an ideal to which many aspire, it becomes a burden for others. It may be for some that two hours once a week is preferable to fifteen minutes every day. In a recent discussion

12 Killingray, *Encouraging Biblical Literacy*, p 3.

13 For a rather more rigorous treatment see Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, Inter Varsity Press, Leicester 1998, esp. pp 263-265.

with a group of people in their twenties, it became clear that prayer was a daily occurrence while Bible reading happened on a less frequent basis. This may be acceptable if it is not an entirely arbitrary process but has a certain rhythm. It may be for some that there are periods of particular intensity perhaps on a retreat, when one can be immersed in Scripture for a longer period.

Bible reading agencies increasingly feel that it is primarily a matter of motivation. If we are to bring about a change in patterns of personal spirituality, and to ensure that the Bible has a significant place, it will start with church leaders. Sermons which are biblical and relevant, which make connections between the text and the modern world will whet the appetite. Preaching which opens up new possibilities, which stimulates the imagination and which builds confidence in the truth and power of Scripture will send the congregation away looking for more. If part of the problem is a loss of confidence in the authority, relevance and credibility of the Bible these issues will need to be addressed and answers provided.

We need more than good biblical preaching. We need evidence of a personal enthusiasm for Scripture which provides models to which others can aspire. When I first joined Scripture Union in the early 1970s, stories were still current of a member of staff who had retired a few years earlier whose daily practice was to challenge others with the question, 'What is your blessed thought for today?' While the nature of the language and the directness of the challenge might be inappropriate today, the expectation that those of us who have read Scripture will have taken something from it which sustains and nurtures is something which should not be lost. Those in leadership have a special responsibility to model such enthusiasm. An atmosphere in which the people of God talk naturally and freely about the discoveries they have made and the impact which this is having on their lives will be an atmosphere in which others are encouraged to read for themselves.

Some churches have developed mentoring schemes in which a mature and experienced Christian spends time with new Christians, helping them to find ways of engaging with the Bible either one on one or in small groups. Others have linked small groups with personal Bible reading, providing a degree of support and encouragement. Still others have found that linking the Sunday preaching with a Bible reading scheme has led to an increase in personal reading.

The patterns of the future will be more flexible. Paradoxically we need to recover both discipline and freedom. Discipline is not a popular concept and we are indebted to Richard Foster¹⁴ and Dallas Willard¹⁵ for reminding us that a disciplined spiritual life, far from being oppressive, can be a source of growth and joy. Training in these disciplines could become an important part of the help we give to Christians. But the discipline must direct us to God. It is enjoyment of God that matters not an enjoyment of a spiritual routine or academic investigation. Alistair McGrath argues for a recovery of 'the relational, emotional and imaginative aspects of biblical spirituality that the Enlightenment declared to be improper.'¹⁶

14 Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Hodder & Stoughton, Dunton Green 1980.

15 Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1996.

16 Alistair McGrath, *Beyond the Quiet Time*, SPCK, London 1995, p 20.

We need to recapture the spirit of the psalmist who could delight in the Law (e.g. Ps. 119:77,97). We may find that allowing Scripture to speak for itself is more desirable. Space for reading, for meditation and for prayer may be what people need rather than elaborate schemes or comments which offer the potted thoughts of others.

People will need the freedom to develop their own patterns. In Roman Catholic circles *lectio divina* is making a comeback, and I find an increasing interest in its simple approach among Evangelicals. Ignatian spirituality, especially its emphasis on the use of the imagination, opens doors for other people. The investigation of the relationship between spirituality and personality type has helped some to find patterns which are appropriate. Celtic affirmation of the creation and the everyday world of work has provided a framework which makes great sense to many in our world. That is not to say that there are no dangers in this new found freedom and eclecticism – there are, and all approaches need to be tested against a biblical foundation.

It is not simply about individuals. If we can help couples to find ways of reading and praying together, this can then lead to family prayers and helping children to start their own reading at an early age. History shows that this is often the best way.

While the use of published materials or reading schemes may not be the be all and end all, they are undoubtedly helpful for many, at least in the early days. If printed materials are inconvenient there are alternatives which can be accessed on the world wide web or delivered by email. Many have come into a new enthusiasm for the Bible through listening; the Faith Comes by Hearing project is perhaps the most notable example of a co-ordinated scheme.

Is there a future for the Quiet Time? I believe that there has to be if we want mature, responsible, active members of the Christian community. But it may be very different to what some of us have known in the past. The challenge is to create enthusiasm, provide support, introduce skills and stimulate the imagination. We have no choice for without it discipleship will be incomplete.

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