

The Bible and Evangelism. 1: The Prime Purpose of Revelation

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To write something on the Bible and Evangelism, as the Editor has invited me to do, is not such an easy task after the appearance of Dr. A. M. Chirgwin's book, *The Bible in World Evangelism*. Is it possible to say anything that Dr. Chirgwin has not said already? Perhaps not, and yet one at make the attempt. For if our evangelism is not rooted in the Bible it will remain fruitless; and if one takes evangelistic element out of the Bible there will not be much left. The Bible and evangelism are so vitally bound up with each other that in thinking of the one we cannot help thinking of the other.

If the constant repetition of "The Bible says...!" makes a preacher a biblical evangelist, there can be no doubt of Dr. Billy Graham's title to the description. And yet, the fact that a preacher fills his address with quotations from the Bible is not enough to make him a Biblical evangelist. We have it on higher authority than Shakespeare's that "the devil can cite scripture for his purpose." It is evident that, by a judicious placing together of isolated Bible quotations severed from their contexts, a man could appear to show that the Bible supported anything he wished. In *The Pilgrim's Progress* we hear of a character named Self-Will who could justify any action he chose to take by an appeal to Scriptural precedent. The Pauline letters are not the only parts the of Bible which some readers "wrest... unto their own destruction."

But misquotation or misapplication Scripture need not be insincere. It not so long in this country since the injunction in the Book of the Covenant against allowing a witch to live was thought to demand the execution of unhappy women reputed to be in league with the powers of darkness; and one can think of similar misunderstandings which are still quite prevalent. Or, in the realm of doctrine, one meets good people who will quote text (say) from the Book of Ecclesiastes as if it were the last word for Christians on the state of the dead. When we are told that "the Bible says, 'Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life'," or "the Bible says, 'This might have been sold much and given to the poor'," Let us remember that the latter quotation comes from Judas Iscariot and the former one from Satan himself. Their words are recorded in the Bible, no doubt, but we should not make the Bible responsible for their sentiments!

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What then shall we say of Dr. Graham and his reiterated affirmation, "The Bible says..."? Just this, that when Dr. Graham says "The Bible says..." he quotes texts which make their contribution to what the Bible really does say. For the Bible, amid all its infinite variety, has one central message. If that were not so, the Bible would be a mere anthology of unrelated works instead of being, as it is, the record of God's saving purpose for mankind which has come to fruition in our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is no accident that a fresh interest in Christian evangelism should coincide with the rediscovery by many of our leading theologians of the unity of the Bible. This point need not be laboured here so soon after the series of articles on "The Rediscovery of the Bible" which appeared in November and December last. We have only to think of the titles of some recent books to realise the trend of much contemporary Biblical study, such as *The Unity of the New Testament*, by Professor A. M. Hunter, or *The Unity of the Bible*, by Professor H. H. Rowley. But readers of this paper may more readily recall Dr. Norman Snaith's Fernley-Hartley Lecture for 1944, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*. In the closing part of this work Dr. Smith argued that the distinctive ideas of the Old Testament—God's salvation-procuring righteousness, His love for man, man's responsive love to God, and the Spirit of God as His enabling power in human life—are the basis of the New Testament also.

There was nothing fanciful in Paul's claim that the righteousness of God which the Gospel unfolds was attested in advance by the law and the prophets. The proclamation in which the whole Bible finds its unity is one of salvation by faith alone—by faith in Christ alone. "The true development from the Pauline theology is to be found in Luther and in John Wesley." Yes, indeed, and it is to be found in Billy Graham as well, and in many another evangelist who has not been consciously influenced by current theological trends but knows what he says and whereof he affirms because the Spirit of God has brought this saving message to birth in his own life. Whether it be by careful study or by a sound spiritual instinct, such a preacher will support his testimony to the power of the Gospel by Biblical quotations and allusions which sum up various essential aspects of the central Biblical message.

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There are several statements in the New Testament which seem to sum up the prime purpose of the Biblical revelation. "The holy scriptures," we read in 2 Timothy 3. 15, "are able to make thee wise unto salvation though faith which is in Christ Jesus." Peter, proclaiming the Gospel of Christ in the house of Cornelius, rounded off his preaching with the affirmation: "To him bear all the prophets witness, that through his name every one that believeth on him shall receive remission of sins" (Acts 10. 43). And we hear our Lord Himself say of the Scriptures in John 5. 39, "These are they which bear witness of me."

These and similar passages refer, of course, to the Old Testament. No Christian seriously disputes that the New Testament bears witness to Christ. But part of the New Testament witness to Christ is to assure us that the Old Testament bears witness to Him as well, that He is the fulfilment and the answer to all that God promised to the fathers through the prophets. For the Christian, therefore, Christ is the key to the understanding of the Old Testament revelation: So the apostles and other members of the primitive Church discovered, and their discovery made the Old Testament a new and intelligible book to them. The prophets themselves might have searched and inquired diligently to discover what person or what time

was pointed to by "the Spirit of the Messiah" within them (1 Peter 1. 11); but the apostles spent no long time in such inquiry after the saving events had been fulfilled in their midst: "This is that," they said, "which was spoken by the prophet" (Acts 2. 16).

They did not need to adopt elaborate allegorising or typological methods of interpretation in order to discern this witness to Christ in the Old Testament; and neither do we, in spite of a recrudescence of this fashion in some theological circles today. Professor C. H. Dodd has recently shown us (in *According to the Scriptures*) that the New Testament writers' use of the Old Testament exhibits "the rudiments of an original, coherent and flexible method of exegesis" which has regard to the primary context and involves a distinctive interpretation of history as subject to the sovereignty of God. And it is difficult to escape his conclusion that the mind which gave birth to this "most original and fruitful process of rethinking the Old Testament" was no other than the mind of Christ.

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St. John tells his readers that the purpose which governed the selection and presentation of material in his Gospel was that they might believe Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing they might have life in His name (John 20. 31). One might very well argue that the same purpose underlies the other Gospels too, and the whole New Testament, and indeed all the Biblical writings inasmuch as they bear witness to Christ. But is not this the very essence of Christian evangelism—to bear witness to Christ in order that others may believe in him? Was not this the very commission with which the risen Christ charged His disciples? If, then, the purpose of the Bible and the essence of evangelism are so completely involved in one another, how can true and effective evangelism be other than thoroughly Biblical?

So, when I find a man in whose own experience the message of the Bible has come to life, a man who knows Jesus Christ and is eager to introduce Him to others, I am not greatly concerned whether his theology or his Biblical exegesis tallies in all respects with mine. He commends the crucified and exalted Jesus as an all-sufficient Saviour, his theology is sound; if he knows that the dominant note throughout the Bible is one of witness to this Saviour, and keeps on sounding that note, his exegesis is not likely to go hopelessly astray. That man is my Christian brother; God bless him and his ministry.

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