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DOCTRINE FOR TODAY

SERIES: THE ARMY'S ELEVEN ARTICLES OF FAITH

We believe that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were given by inspiration of God, and that they only constitute the Divine rule of Christian faith and practice.

FIND myself wondering if the biblical writers ever struggled to find the right words to express their thoughts. Did they, like many authors through the centuries, ponder over initial ideas and carefully plan before writing? And did they ever doubt that they had really expressed, in ways that people would really understand, the depth of their inspiration, knowledge and emotion? These are not flippant questions, nor are they irreverent, but rather they spring from a sense of wonder at the way in which the Bible still speaks so eloquently in the 21st century. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, ordinary human beings recorded their understanding of the nature of God and his actions in history, reflected upon the human condition and wrote their accounts of the relationship between God, individuals and groups.

Many generations later, their work retains the capacity to teach, challenge, inspire and comfort even when translated into languages and cultures that are far removed from the experience of the authors. The deep spiritual and theological significance of the incarnation is summed up in a few words – ‘the Word became flesh’ (John 1:14); the enormity of God’s grace finds expression in a stark statement – ‘while we were still sinners, Christ died for us’ (Romans 5:8); and the ultimate benchmark for our life as Christians is described in the beautiful prose of 1 Corinthians chapter 13, with its challenging summary statement – ‘the greatest of these is love’ (v 13). The text has not lost its meaning and power even when read at great distance from its time and place of origin.

The biblical writers told their story and wrote their message faithfully, speaking of how God, who is essentially mystery, has revealed his character through his actions in history. We read of a God who is both revealed to us and yet is ultimately unknowable; a God of power, majesty, holiness, justice and love, who claims his people’s devotion, their loyalty and right living. We see how, throughout history, the people of God began to understand something of God’s character and their obligations to him through a pattern of obedience followed by disobedience, repentance, reflection and new insight. Honest about

their own, and their nation’s, failure to keep the covenant, the authors witnessed to a God who would not abandon his people and always reached out to them with justice and love, demonstrating how their God not only required the worship, commitment and holiness of his people but provided the means to make this possible, ultimately through Jesus Christ.

But the Bible is more than the history of a people, more than a source of information about God’s dealings with humanity. It is a living document which draws us in to the story so that we are transformed by our own encounter with God, and find in it both the foundation for, and measure of, right belief (orthodoxy) and right action (orthopraxy). The influence of the Holy Spirit is not confined to the writers, but also extends to the readers as we discover that it has meaning for our own lives and circumstances, and we are formed into the people of God in our own generation.

As we develop habits of reading, become absorbed in Scripture, and reflect upon it in the light of Christian teaching, our personal understanding of who God is will influence, and to some extent shape, the meaning we discern. At the same time the biblical text will develop and enrich that understanding, becoming a source of information, a factor in our formation and the catalyst for our transformation.

FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:

WHAT ARE THE IMPORTANT CHALLENGES FOR CHRISTIANITY IN YOUR CONTEXT AT THE PRESENT TIME?
HOW CAN YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE WHOLE MESSAGE OF THE BIBLE HELP YOU KNOW HOW TO ADDRESS THESE?
HOW DO WE APPROACH PARTS OF SCRIPTURE THAT WE FIND DIFFICULT OR ALIEN TO OUR EVERYDAY LIFE?
WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE ‘DIFFICULT’ PASSAGES?
WHAT DO YOU DO TO MAKE WILLIAM BOOTH’S HOPES A REALITY IN YOUR OWN LIFE?

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We will discover that the more we understand, the more there is to discover and to enrich our lives.

Doctrine is the history of how the Church has reflected upon, and interpreted, faith. It explores and explains belief, and has developed as preachers, teachers, theologians and other Christians have reflected, in the context of their time, upon the meaning of their understanding of the relationship between God, creation and humanity as revealed in the Bible and how this relationship is worked out in everyday life. The biblical revelation provides the foundation for Christian doctrine and the standard against which it is judged.

The Bible is also the authority against which the Christian life must be measured. What we do as Christians emerges from interaction between our understanding of our beliefs, our personal relationship with God and our experience of living in the world. N.T. Wright states in *The New Testament and the People of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God* (1992) that the continual task of the Church is to live, in our own place and time, in ways that are faithful to what has gone before, being obedient to the authority of Scripture. But this is not an excuse for the inertia or entrenchment that refuses to accept change in the name of tradition; if there is no openness to change, faithfulness may be no more than a

synonym for slavish re-enactment of the past.

Thus in an act of ‘faithful improvisation’ we must evaluate fresh insights in the light of Christian tradition. We use the truths of the Bible and the wisdom of Christian history to help us to discern what it means to live authentically as Christians in the 21st century, responding to the challenges of the age in ways that are a proper development of biblical faith. This is not without risk because there is always a danger of misunderstanding and diversion from truth. Christian history provides many examples of times when new reflection has led to heresy and untruth. But if the Church is to remain vibrant and living there is no alternative to finding new expressions of the tradition in each generation. In order to do this we must ensure that our reading of the Bible is in itself accurate, consistent with the revelation of God’s purposes for all of creation, and is engaged in at sufficient depth for us to truly discern the meaning and its implications for our own situation.

Faithful improvisation requires that, as a community, we address the challenges and opportunities of contemporary society in ways which are consistent with the whole message of Scripture, resisting any attempts to distort the biblical message for our own purposes, to find quick ‘solutions’ in the form

of proof texts, or simply to ignore biblical truth because it does not explicitly mention the issue with which we are dealing. Just as, through the centuries, the Church has learned to re-evaluate long held traditions and convictions in the light of new insight and knowledge, so we too must learn to be both open and faithful, ensuring that we neither cling to the past without justification, nor compromise the essentials of our faith in the name of progress.

When the Revised Version of the Bible was published in 1885, William Booth commented: ‘I want to see a new translation of the Bible into the hearts and conduct of living men and women. I want an improved translation – or transference it might be called – of the commandments and promises and teachings and influences of this Book to the minds and feelings and words and activities of the men and women who hold on to it and swear by it and declare it to be an inspired book and the only authorised rule of life’ (*The War Cry* 30 May 30 1885).

The challenge remains. We must stay open to the influence and indwelling of the Holy Spirit so that biblical and doctrinal understanding, personal spiritual experience and reflection upon contemporary society can together ‘translate’ biblical truth into faith and into the life and practice of the 21st century Salvationist community.