



REDISCOVERING OUR FOUNDATIONS

David Hull

DAVID HULL, CHAIR OF MET, CONSIDERS WHAT HAS BEEN LOST AND HOW IT MIGHT BE FOUND AGAIN.

A Fellow of the state-sponsored Chinese Academy of Social Sciences is quoted as saying, 'We were asked to look into what accounted for the ... pre-eminence of the West over the world. ... At first, we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than we had. Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next, we focused on your economic system. But in the past twenty years, we have realised that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West has been so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubt about this' (quoted by Niall Ferguson in 'Civilisation: The West and the Rest').

This Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life in the West has, more recently, been the subject of the agnostic author Tom Holland's masterly, 'Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World'. In it, he demonstrates how, despite the claims (and often ignorance) of those who aggressively pursue a secularising agenda, our whole culture has been

built almost entirely upon Christian assumptions - centred on the humility and power of the Cross of Jesus - which do not make sense when abstracted from the context of the Bible.

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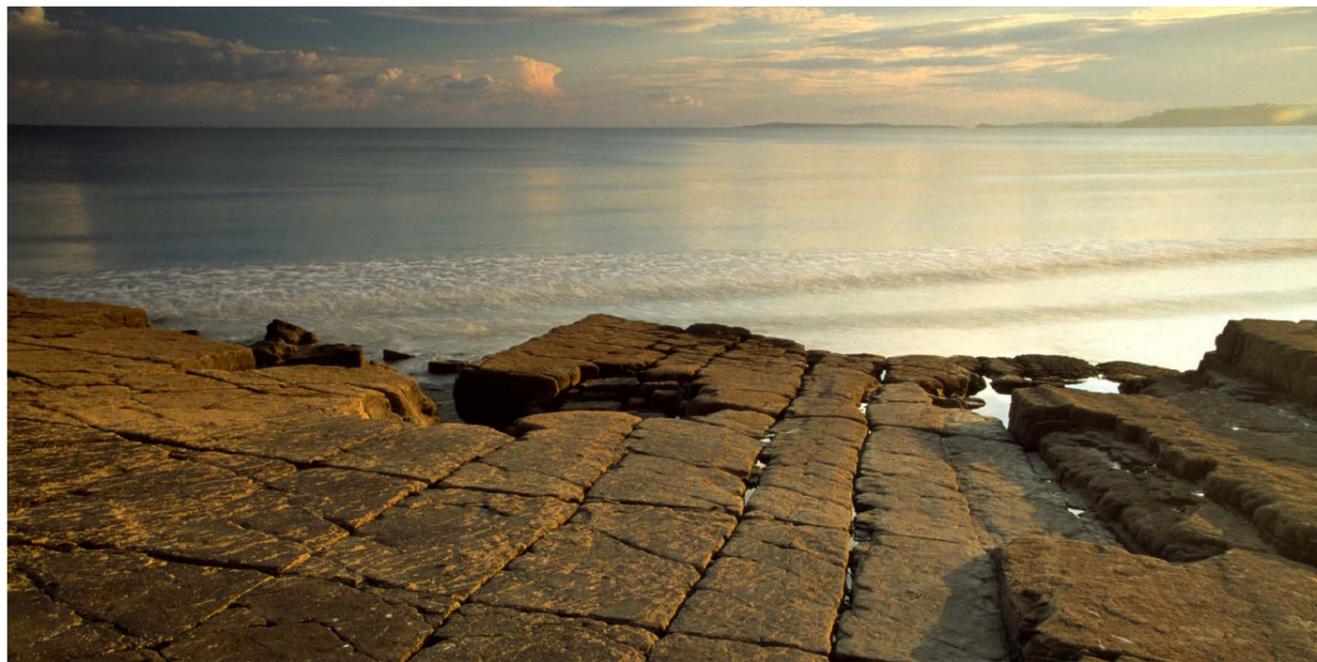
However, here in the West, we now seem to be in the process of ripping out the heart of our cultural life with the naïve expectation that, when we have extracted it, the blood will continue to pump around the body and sustain its life. We have forgotten where we have come from, what has shaped us, and what has given us everything we have. We are losing sight of the Judeo-Christian worldview, the way of

understanding the world that is shaped by the Bible and which offers answers to the ultimate questions of life: Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here? How ought we to live? Where are we going? We have lost the sense of living our lives within the Great Story the Bible tells from beginning to end.

We now live within a clash of competing worldviews that offer a confusing cacophony of answers to such questions, leading to a dreadful sense of 'lostness' in the world. We see it especially amongst teenagers and young adults. We tell them they can be anything they want to be, but they don't know who they are.

It is not, of course, the first time the world has experienced such turmoil and change. Competing political visions of the twentieth century had catastrophic effects which led to world war and the threat of impending nuclear annihilation. The revival in which Methodism has its roots, looking further back, occurred amidst a clash of worldviews which, on the continent, resulted in violent revolution.

On Thursday 17 August 1758, John Wesley went to Bristol Cathedral to attend a performance of George Frideric Handel's oratorio 'Messiah'. It was an historic occasion, for this was the first performance of 'Messiah' to be given in an English Church. Until then, for sixteen



years, the work had been performed to popular acclaim exclusively in secular venues, such as music halls and theatres.

What seemed to impress Wesley most was the way in which the congregation listened. Perhaps it was a striking contrast to the riots which, not infrequently, accompanied his own preaching! This is what he wrote in his journal about the performance: 'I doubt if that congregation was ever so serious at a sermon, as they were during this performance. In many parts, especially several of the choruses, it exceeded my expectation'.

He was moved not only by the attentiveness of the congregation, but also by the beauty of the music. It has known unprecedented popularity throughout its 280-year history. Why was it so popular?

The answer appears to be, not least, because it was launched upon the world at just the right time: in the midst of a clash of worldviews. The so-called Enlightenment, with its emphasis on human rational thought and progress had sought to undermine and attack Christian faith at its foundations. The religious beliefs of Deism were spreading, encouraging human beings to see that the solutions to all their problems lay within themselves and not in a distant deity. There was no need, the Deists argued, for a Messiah to save humanity; they must save themselves.

The vast mass of the population was left not knowing what to believe, filled with doubt and disorientation. It was into a world such as this that Handel's 'Messiah' was born. The very first words of the oratorio are striking: "Comfort ye! Comfort ye my people" saith your God'. Handel, spurred on by his devout librettist Charles Jennens, held out the comfort for which people longed, comfort that could be found only in the retelling of the Great Story. In the words of the bidding prayer from the famous service of nine lessons and carols, it is none other than the 'tale of the loving purposes of God' presented throughout the pages of Scripture.

Like then, this Great Story has today again been lost from within much of the very culture it birthed. However, the greatest danger of all, I believe, is that we are in danger of losing this Judeo-Christian worldview also from within the Church, which is increasingly shaped by other worldviews. We no longer know what the Judeo-Christian worldview is. How, then, can we live our lives faithfully within it? We, too, desperately need to hear again of the comfort that can only be found in retelling the Great Story with joyful confidence and beauty.

It is a situation that has been a long time in coming. Tom Wright outlines this Great Story as a play of five acts: Creation; Fall; the People of Israel; the life, death and resurrection of Jesus;

and the Church (see, for example, his 'Scripture and the Authority of God'). He suggests, however, that Christians have often been tempted to tell only part of our story, jumping from the problem of the Fall to the solution in Jesus, missing out entirely the whole story of the People of Israel. This we have done despite the fact that it is only against the backdrop of the whole of the Old Testament that the rest of the story makes any real sense and finds its meaning.

As time has gone by, we have dropped the beginning of the story, which reminds us that we are creatures, created by God, declared by him to be 'very good', living within a good world. Instead, we have simply focussed on the message that human beings have fallen short of the glory of God and that Jesus can restore us. We have also tended to end the story with individuals being put right, fully and finally, in heaven, stopping short of the renewal of all creation - bodily resurrection within a new earth. The story has been abbreviated and Christian preachers have often presented only the edited highlights.

More recently, there has been even more of an abridgement. People do not like to hear that they have fallen short, or that there is anything wrong with them. So now, the focus of much Christian communication is on the part of the Great Story which tells everyone that God loves them. Wider culture

asserts that all we need to hear is affirmation of who we really are, so that is all the Church has said. The clash of worldviews has seeped into the Church and has shaped us more than we might like to admit.

I wrote in the conclusion of 'The Runaway Train' (available from the MET website) about gherkins and cucumbers. Although I have always liked gherkins, I had never realised that they were simply pickled cucumbers, which I do not like at all. That's what the pickling process does: if you submerge something in another culture for long enough, it can change beyond all recognition. We live in a world of 'pickled people': we have all been pickled by the culture of the world, a culture no longer shaped by the Great Story of the Bible, the Judeo-Christian worldview.

It follows, of course, that the Church is not only filled with pickled people on the inside, but is itself also marinated on the outside in the culture of the world. We seem to have come to the point at which it is difficult to tell where the one ends and the other begins. It was, of course, never intended to be that way. The Church is 'sent into the world' but it is never to be 'of the world' (John 17:14-19). It is supposed to provide the context in which pickled people become unpickled through being submerged in a radically different culture. Thus Paul, having described in Romans 1 how human culture all too easily drifts away from the Lord and his ways, issues his great challenge to the Church in Romans 12:1-2:

'Therefore 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. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.'

The world tells all sorts of stories in an attempt to shape our lives and our understanding of our identity. The Bible tells the greatest story the world has ever known, the only true story. It is not surprising and it is nothing new that this



Great Story is continually challenged. It has been so almost from the beginning of time itself: 'Did God really say?' is a question that was first whispered in the Garden of Eden.



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Our task within the Church is to retell the Great Story in every generation, to live our lives within it, to invite others to step into it, and to pass it on to future generations. Indeed, we are to retell it on the first day of each week as we gather in worship, whenever we break bread and share wine, and as we pass through the seasons and festivals of each year. The Church, in the providence of God, is supposed to provide the context in which pickled people become unpickled, in which we learn not to conform to the pattern of the world, shaped by all those competing stories, but to be transformed.

Notice where the transformation begins: with the renewal of the mind: the way we think, the way we understand, the way our minds are shaped by the Great Story in which we are called to live our lives. All human beings live their lives within a story, a 'metanarrative', with which they make sense of the world and answer the ultimate questions of life. The crucial question is: which story is shaping your life? Which story are you inhabiting in this age of a clash of worldviews?

The challenge for every Christian is to be transformed by the renewing of the mind according to this Great Story. The evangelistic invitation for people who

are not yet Christians is to step into this Great Story through the door of repentance and faith, opened through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Surely, the great need for the Church is to make sure that it is itself properly shaped by the Great Story and that it faithfully, clearly and compellingly retells the Great Story - and with such joyful confidence and beauty - that the Judeo-Christian worldview is rediscovered, not only within the Church it formed, but also within the wider culture for which it was foundational.

John Wesley seems never to have written about unpickling pickled people! He did, however, write about scriptural holiness: the 'grand depositum' - the family treasure - entrusted by God to the Methodist movement as its central purpose. Wesley saw every Christian as being on a journey towards Christian perfection, the likeness of Jesus, the image of God restored. Surely that is what it means to live our lives within the Great Story. He knew that we need the means of grace to grow in such holiness: not least the reading and proclamation of Scripture and the support of one another in Christian fellowship, through it all continually being re-evangelised by the retelling and re-hearing of the Great Story (see Jack Jackson's 'Offering Christ: John Wesley's Evangelistic Vision').



Today, the competing stories within the world are very compelling and very confusing, often driven by an aggressive secular agenda which seeks to force Christian faith out of the picture altogether. They compete for the minds of Christians just as much as for the minds of everyone else. How do we tell again the Great Story of the Bible within our Church and culture? How do we rearticulate the Judeo-Christian worldview within this clash of worldviews, so that we are transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that people are invited to step into this story, and so that we all seek to live our lives within it? How do we enable people to make sense of the great issues of our day within the context of the Great Story - issues of a global pandemic; of the continued rise of radical Islam on the one hand and aggressive secularisation on the other; of political polarisation and of the erosion of freedom of speech; of attacks on religious freedom; of climate change, and race, and sexuality, and gender, and identity; of the sanctity of life, particularly at its beginning and end? All these questions, and more, seem to be used today to drive a very different agenda in the world. It's even more dangerous when that agenda finds its way into the Church. Within this clash of worldviews, there is a great need for a joyful, confident and beautiful retelling of the whole story of the whole Bible.



This article seeks to raise the questions and provoke reflection rather than to offer answers! There is, however, an increasing number of people who are working in this area. Two authors who have sought to explore these questions and set out challenges for the Church are Glynn Harrison and Carl Trueman. Glynn Harrison is a retired professor of psychiatry at the University of Bristol. He has written two books about contemporary culture that are both well worth reading: 'The Big Ego Trip' explores the significant characteristics of contemporary culture, and 'A Better Story' considers questions of identity and sexuality. He issues a significant challenge to the Church: in a world of competing stories, the Church must tell a better story - the greatest story the world has ever known - the one true story. It is a challenge that is capturing the imaginations of increasing numbers of Christians in our day and age.

Carl Trueman is Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies at Grove City College, Pennsylvania, though he still speaks with his native English accent! He kindly agreed to take part in an interview for MET's online event for the Methodist Conference last year (the video of which, entitled 'A Vision for Life: Where Christianity Meets Culture', is available on the MET website). He traces the development of contemporary culture through the eyes of a historian in his book, 'The Rise and Triumph of the

Modern Self'. Towards the end of the book, he considers the challenges of his survey of contemporary culture for the Church of today.

In our interview, I asked him to say more about his comment in the book that today's Church could learn much from the Church of the second century. In response, he first pointed out the differences between our culture and that of the second century, not least that Christianity had then never been the dominant cultural narrative, whereas those days have now come and gone for us. He then talked about the similarities: Christians are increasingly viewed now, as they were then, as an immoral minority cult.

How did the Church respond to those challenges of the surrounding culture in the second century? Carl Trueman said: they took Jesus at his word when he promised, 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another' (John 13:35). They took him at his word; they loved one another; they developed true Christian communities in the Church.

In other words, we could say, they kept the Great Story alive in their hearts and minds and they truly inhabited it. In obedience to Jesus' command, they lived lives of love towards one another and towards a world in need. Consequently, others were attracted

to enter into the story themselves, to become followers of Jesus. Within two hundred years, the Judeo-Christian worldview had become the prevailing narrative which shaped developing cultures, including our own.

It seems to me that there is at least as great a need today as there ever was in the days of George Frideric Handel and John Wesley - a need for a rediscovery of our foundations, the Judeo-Christian worldview. There is a desperation, a longing for a retelling, in word and deed, of the Great Story - the whole message of the whole Bible. May the Lord raise up in our own day people to retell, with joyful confidence and beauty, the Great Story of the loving purposes of God that we might be transformed by the renewing of our minds and that many more might enter into the Story themselves, through Jesus and to his glory!

The Revd Dr David A. Hull is Chair of Methodist Evangelicals Together and of Share Jesus International, and is a member of the Evangelical Alliance's Council. He is a minister in full connexion with the Methodist Church, currently serving with the Free Methodist Church as Lead Pastor of Freedom Church in Kingswood, Bristol. His analysis of the developments which led to last year's controversial decisions of the British Methodist Church, 'The Runaway Train', can be obtained freely from methodistevangelicals.org.uk/runaway-train. The video referred to above, along with others, can be found at methodistevangelicals.org.uk/videos.

