

Getting a world that does not get It or Thinking about today's Baals

Jesus said:

“Blessed are you when others revile you ... and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” (Matthew 5:11)

Again:

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” (John 15:18-19)

A little later he prayed:

“I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.” (John 17:14-15)

Peter wrote about how a believer must live in such a world:

Keep your conduct among the [nations] honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. (1 Peter 2:12)

Paul wrote about the shape of Christian ministry in such a world:

... we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ ... (2 Corinthians 10:3b-5)

Jesus' promise — on which we rely as we live and serve in the world — is that:

“... everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven ...” (Matthew 10:32)

What I would like to do in our time together is this —

- (1) Think with you a little about how *our* world — so very different in many ways from the world in which these words were first uttered — is nonetheless living up to Jesus' words, and how that is impacting Christian people and Christian witness in our day. I am trying to reflect on our relation to the world in which we find ourselves, and the relation of our world to us. What's going on?
- (2) Briefly consider the positives and negatives of how we Christians are responding to this situation today.
- (3) Make some suggestions that might help us to "get" what is going on, and perhaps to understand a little more of what faithfulness means.

There are a number of caveats I would like to make.

- I am conscious that I am paddling in the shallows of some very deep issues. That's all I can manage at this stage, but want to acknowledge that most things we will talk about are much more complex than my brief comments might suggest. And I am aware that others are discussing these matters from a variety of helpful points of view more thoroughly than I am able to here.
- I am concerned that the kind of discussion I am embarking on can be turned into a kind of Christian *victim mentality*. We must not go there. However hard it is for us to be Christian today — and it is — it is *very* far from the *worst* of times. The opposite is closer to the truth. It is a brilliant time to be Christian.
- Furthermore, I am aware that this will be a discussion that may seem less relevant for those living and working for Christ in cross-cultural contexts. The "world" we will be thinking about is largely the so-called western world. But that is a big part of the world — and it is impacting the rest of the world. And I do not think any of us are untouched by the things we will be talking about.
- I have also noticed that the kind of issues I want to raise today can become all-absorbing *in themselves*, and take us away from our main game. My purpose, however, is to help us play our main game well.

- Other qualifications I should have made will no doubt become obvious as we proceed.

Let's begin with some reflections on being Christian in the world in which we find ourselves today — under the rather unpromising heading:

1. "... when they speak against you as evildoers"

A good candidate for the issue of our times — for Christian believers — at least in so-called western societies — is this. Many people in this world — at this time — in this "culture" if you like — find it *almost impossible* to see God's word to us — God's ways with us — as *good*.

Isaiah's words have a strange resonance when he spoke of —

... those who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter! (Isaiah 5:20)

Christians — almost by definition — are people convinced that God, God's Word, and God's ways are not only *true* — and not only *right* — but they are *good*. However many ordinary people — I am not talking about the obviously anti-Christian activists, or the angry atheists — many ordinary people see things that you and I believe are *good*, as *evil*.

Although this situation is not entirely new, in relatively recent times many of us have been overwhelmed and thrown off-balance by the extent and depth of this phenomenon. This way of thinking has rapidly become familiar, respectable and dominant. It's mainstream. It's the air we now breathe. *They speak against us* (we who love God's word and God's ways) *as evildoers*.

And as we breathe this air, it can become difficult — even for Christian believers — to see the *goodness* of God's ways.

Let me illustrate with an example that is uncomfortable — but that is the point.

Consider an idea that we find a number of times in the New Testament — the idea of Christian wives “submitting” to their husbands.

Even at a Priscilla & Aquila Conference, I am pretty sure that you — like me — sense how awkward that idea feels in today’s world. It feels worse than awkward because, frankly, it doesn’t feel *right* — it doesn’t feel *good* — it doesn’t feel *appropriate*.

This idea (wives “submitting” to their husbands) did not feel *as* terrible for most of our grandparents. Thinking has changed. *We* are *enlightened* — we like to imagine — in ways that they were not. We have — we may think — been sensitized to *injustices* that they seem to have tolerated. The ways of thinking that make the idea of wives “submitting” to their husbands unacceptable — seem to be obviously *superior*. *Morally* superior. We could call it *progress*. Many do.

The point of raising that particularly controversial idea is not to focus on that issue as such, but to illustrate how aspects of the Bible’s teaching that may have caused little reaction *not so long ago*, have become highly *offensive* in the world in which we find ourselves.

But my point is that this is now the case with *much* of the Bible’s teaching. Let’s list a few examples of Biblical teaching that Bible-believers know in our *heads* must be true — because we are convinced that the Bible is God’s Word — but in our *hearts* do not feel OK — they are *embarrassing* in a particular way. *Morally* embarrassing. *Offensive*. *Morally* offensive. And we feel it.

<u>Bible teaching</u>	<u>Offensive because ...</u>
• “Submission” in marriage	“unjust,” “inequality”
• Christian sexual morality	“oppressive,” “cruel,” “restrictive”
• Divine judgment (hell)	“hateful”
• The particularity of Christianity and implied criticism of other religions	“bigoted,” “intolerant,” “exclusive”
• Violence in the name of God (particularly OT)	“hateful,” “cruel”
• Forgiveness ¹	“unjust”
• “Do not take revenge” (Rom 12:19, NIV)	“justice <i>for</i> the victim”

This is different from the embarrassment that many Christians felt about their faith as I grew up. Back in those far off days it was more an *intellectual* embarrassment. *How could you possibly believe in miracles? — a virgin birth!? — a resurrection!? — heaven and hell!?*, and so on. There was an idea around then that science could in principle explain everything and God was therefore an *unnecessary hypothesis*. Those who clung to belief in God just lacked the courage or the intelligence to follow through the logic of scientific discovery. The Enlightenment, it was supposed, was the beginning of the end of all religion. Reason had replaced faith.

Believers in those days tended to respond with *rational arguments* for the *reasonableness* of our faith. We argued that reason and Christian faith were friends, not enemies. And we developed a great body of thinking we called Apologetics.

That was then.

¹ For a fascinating discussion of today's discomfort with the idea of forgiveness, see Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019), pp. 174-183.

Today we have a *different kind* of embarrassment. It is not so much that *science* has challenged our faith (although that is still around in the preaching of the angry atheists — Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and the like). But a new *moral* framework has taken hold, within which the Bible's teachings seem unjust, oppressive, exclusive, bigoted, hateful, intolerant, cruel — just some of the terms that have become commonplace to describe Christian views learnt from the Bible — all synonyms for “evil.”

The older Apologetics — while still *essential* — is not *enough* to meet the new situation. We cannot be satisfied if our message seems to be that something unjust, oppressive, exclusive, bigoted, hateful, intolerant and cruel is nonetheless *true*. That is not our message!

In that former age I mentioned a moment ago, evangelism was difficult because as soon as you identified as a Christian believer, you felt that people would think you were *stupid*. The Christian gospel had been *intellectually* discredited — so it was thought. That was hard enough. But it is harder — a lot harder — if you feel that people will think you are *evil* — when the Christian gospel feels *morally* discredited. *If you really believe that, you are a bad person — you are bigoted, hateful, intolerant ... and the rest.*

And it is not just evangelism. Many of the *young people* in our churches are struggling with their Christian faith at precisely *this* point. They are living with a *tension* that they find very difficult. And it is not just young people. Teachers of God's word have a big, challenging — but very important — job to do. In *this context*, we need to learn how to *so* teach the word of God that those who believe can see not just its *truth*, but its *goodness* — its *moral* goodness.

The problem is not *really* new. The New Testament texts with which I began make that clear. We seem to be returning to the kind of challenging situation Christianity faced from the very beginning.

[I was discussing these things with a friend in Cambridge who is a Classics teacher. He pointed me to Tacitus (c. A.D. 55-120) who referred to the Christians as “haters of mankind” (*Annales* 15:44). I would not be at all surprised to hear some people today

endorsing Tacitus's words. "Haters of mankind." I'm not sure precisely what Tacitus meant,² but in the early days of the Christian faith *many* Romans saw, for example, Christian sexual morality as *evil* — the very idea that a person in power should not take sexual pleasure wherever and however he wanted was *offensive*.³]

So — if the Christian message — or at least particular aspects of it — have become *morally offensive* to many of our contemporaries, what should we do about this?

2. What should we do about this?

Avoid the problem?

Some of us — perhaps almost without thinking about it too much — just do our best to *avoid* the problem by *ignoring* — or playing down — the Bible teachings that are giving offense. Talk and think about God's *love* for everyone, about *kindness* and *generosity* — but put the offensive things aside. My impression is that in many Christian circles today we hear a lot less about the Biblical teachings in our list than we did at an earlier time. We are not *denying* them. We are just *ignoring* them — to avoid offending people. We want people to see the goodness of Christianity, so we try to keep the things that they see as evil in the background.

But that's not entirely honest. We are living *in denial* of the problem — never a good long-term strategy — and it cannot possibly end well.

Revise the problem away?

Better than that is the response that does some critical reflection on *our understandings* of the Biblical teachings that cause such offense today. Perhaps it is not the Biblical teachings *as such* that cause offense, but insensitive, superficial, and out-of-date *misunderstandings* of those teachings. In the light of today's sensitivities can we *rethink* what "submission" really means — *so that* it will no longer cause offense? Can we *think*

² Larry Siedentop suggests that Christians were regarded as "enemies of the human race" because of "[t]he refusal of martyrs to bend under the claims of family and civic piety or to worship the Emperor." Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Penguin Random House, 2014), pp. 79-80.

³ See Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (London: Little, Brown, 2019), p. 81.

again about sexual morality — and what the Bible *really* counts as immorality? And so on. Might we find that the Bible’s teachings are actually *less offensive* than people think?

Up to a point, that is a right thing to do. It is more than likely that we *have* misunderstood to some degree some of the Bible’s teachings. This *may* have something to do with our insensitivity to issues that have more recently become sensitive. Perhaps today we can see inadequacies in our earlier understandings of a number of things.

I have myself gone through a process something like that in my understanding of that idea of “submission.” As I have tried to understand what “submission” in marriage means in the relevant Biblical texts, in their contexts, I have found myself wondering why it is that we are not agonizing *just as much* over what “love” means, when husbands are told to *love* their wives? Do you really think that the Bible’s teaching about the true and proper relationship of a *husband* to his wife is *less controversial* — *less unacceptable* — *less offensive* — *in today’s world* than the Bible’s teaching about the true and proper relationship of a *wife* to her husband? It’s just that the world is not yet offended by the Bible’s idea of love. But it probably should be! What the Bible’s teaching expects of a Christian husband is *at least as troubling* in today’s climate as what the Bible teaches about a Christian wife. And I do not think it is possible to rightly understand *one* without *the other*. I will come back to that.

But *rethinking* what might have been our inadequate understandings of Biblical teachings is not enough. Not if it involves an uncritical acceptance of the “enlightened” moral sensitivities of our time — and not if it is driven by those sensitivities. Because it is *at least as likely* that there are problems with the *moral framework* that has made so many Christian ideas seem unjust or oppressive or bigoted, or whatever. And revising Biblical teaching *to make it acceptable* to today’s moral framework is upside down thinking. It makes the Bible dance to the world’s tune. Not a good idea.

Ignore the problem?

But some of us, I think, find it all too hard, and try to *attack* the problem by ignoring *the problem*. We *affirm* our understanding of the Bible’s teachings, often forcefully and

repeatedly — and simply don't care if it does not *feel* good or right. We might go to great lengths to ensure and demonstrate that our understanding is indeed Biblical — the Bible *does* teach this idea — and that settles the matter. How you might *feel* about it is hardly important.

Sometimes we might even feel a bit virtuous by putting a lot of *emphasis* on a biblical idea *precisely because* it is an idea that people feel uncomfortable with today. The more the world *hates* the idea, the more we *affirm* it. We are defending Biblical Christianity — precisely where it is under attack!

Sticking with our example, in some of our circles we might think we are defending Biblical Christianity by emphasizing “submission” whenever we talk about Christian marriage. We beat the drum — not really caring about the problems this word causes many people today. As long as we keep using the Bible's words in the Bible's way — we are being Biblical — we are being faithful — and courageous — and we are defending God's good purposes for marriage against the attacks of the world.

Likewise with Bible teaching about sex. As long as we are *against* what the Bible is against, and *for* what the Bible is for, we are being faithful.

Again — although I might be caricaturing just a little — that is a right thing to do — up to a point. But we need to be careful.

Because many of us — I think most of us under a certain age — have absorbed the climate of thought that surrounds us so deeply that this approach of simply forcefully affirming Bible teachings can involve a kind of suppression of our consciences. At worst we are forcing ourselves to *believe* something is *true* while believing — or at least *feeling* — it is *not good* (although we may not be quite game to say so). We should be particularly sensitive to this as we teach young people. We cannot be content with Christians being people who believe things that they *feel* are unjust, oppressive, exclusive, bigoted, hateful, or intolerant. *Believing* the truth must involve *loving* the truth.

And so we must not only *affirm* the Biblical truth, we must address the ways of thinking we have absorbed that may prevent us from *delighting* in the truth.

Let's take some small steps towards doing just that.

3. Getting a world that doesn't get it

Here I want to begin an exploration, but we will not be able to do much more than that.

I will explore a couple of ideas with some care, but then suggest where this kind of thinking might helpfully go.

With the King	Without the King
1. The value and dignity of human life	
God's gift — love — thankfulness — responsibility — contentment	Rights
Image of God	Equality
2. What's wrong?	
Sin and selfishness —> individual responsibility	Rights denied and inequality —> group 'identity'
3. Solution	
Freedom from ...	Freedom from ...
4. Goal	
Love	Power

1. The value and dignity of human life

A convenient place to start is how we think today about the value and dignity of human life.

Two closely related ideas are at the heart of the moral thought world we are inhaling: *rights* and *equality*.

Rights

Think, first, about *rights* — human rights.

Countries like Australia are often said — approvingly — to have developed a “rights” culture — in contrast to totalitarian regimes where human rights are frequently violated, and the very notion may be repudiated.

The paradigm, for many Westerners, is the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and 60's in the United States — Martin Luther King Jr — “I have a dream ...” — and so on.

And for the avoidance of any doubt or misunderstanding: *an enormous amount of good has been accomplished in the name of human rights*.

But something has happened to the idea of human rights. Where once it was significantly motivated and supported by Biblical references and allusions (just listen to any Martin Luther King speech — including “I have a dream”), *now* the notion of rights has become a key idea in the *repudiation* of much Biblical teaching as immoral.

A powerful part of the offense taken at the idea of “submission” in marriage comes from the sense that a woman's *rights* are being violated.

What has happened?

The idea of human rights goes back at least to canon lawyers of the Middle Ages. It was based on Biblical ideas.⁴ Human rights were understood to be rights applying to every

⁴ See Holland, pp. 331, 385-386. Tim Keller makes the same point in Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (London: Hodder, 2010), p. 166, citing Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law 1150-1625* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997) and Brian Tierney, “The Idea of Natural Rights—Origins and Persistence,” *Northwestern Journal of International Human Rights*, Volume 2 (Spring 2004). Larry Siedentop cites Tertullian (about A.D. 160-225) as one of the earliest to assert a basic human right, namely “that everyone should be free to worship according to his own convictions.” Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Penguin Random House, 2014), p. 78. Siedentop offers an account of the development of the ideas of natural law and natural rights in the 11th and 12th centuries, based on ideas like the equality of status of individuals as the children of God (pp. 208-221; see also p. 245).

human *because* they derived from God, in whose image every human was created. The idea of human rights became possible because of the spread of Christianity.⁵

The idea was refined in the 18th century Enlightenment. The English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) had argued in the previous century for the “*natural rights*” of “life, liberty, and estate [that is, property],” which government ought not deny its citizens.

Through the 18th century the revolutions in America and France led to *declarations* of human rights, the most famous of which states:

We hold these truths to be *self-evident*, that all men are created *equal*, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable *Rights*, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

[In the light of developments today, it is worth noting that “the pursuit of Happiness” in this context did not mean “the pursuit of *pleasure*.” Rather, as one writer has put it, “happiness” meant “that feeling of self-worth and dignity you acquire by contributing to your community and to its civic life.”⁶ Which is rather different!]

In 1948, partly in response to the horrors of World War 2, the General Assembly of the newly established United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Many nations today have their own Bill of Rights, and there are numerous Human Rights Commissions.

⁵ In addition to Holland (previous note), see Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Penguin Random House, 2014), pp. 208-221, 355-363. Also Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law 1150-1625* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). I owe the latter two references to Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just* (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, 2010), p. 193 note 10.

⁶ US Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy in a lecture in 2005, quoted in John M. Bridgeland, *Heart of the Nation: Volunteering and America’s Civic Spirit* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), p. 36. The full quote is:

“Happiness? In this era happiness carries with it the connotation of self-pleasure; there is a hedonistic component to the definition now. However, that’s not what Jefferson meant, and it’s not what the Framers meant. If you read Washington, he uses the term happiness all the time. As did the other members of the generation at the time of the founding. For them, happiness meant that feeling of self-worth and dignity you acquire by contributing to your community and to its civic life. And that’s the concept of happiness that we have to tell our young people is still within their grasp.”

The upshot is that the idea of human rights *today* — in our “rights culture” — has two significant features. First, it has lost any consciousness of dependence on the Biblical teaching that made the idea possible. Locke’s idea that these rights are “natural” and the notion that they are “self-evident” and “universal” have displaced any need to refer to God. Secondly, the number and kind of “rights” have vastly multiplied — and continue to do so.

We are witnessing consequences of the Enlightenment that have taken several centuries to unravel. The Enlightenment was a movement *dependent* on Biblical teaching and — at the same time — a *departure* from Biblical teaching. “Human *rights*” became a way of holding onto what the Bible had given to Western civilization — namely an understanding of the value and dignity of human life unknown in previous civilizations⁷ — while rejecting the Bible’s basis for this truth. That cannot work. Sooner or later the idea that *depended* on the truth that lay behind it will be *corrupted* when it is detached from that truth.

That seems to be what has happened.

The problem — if not the reason for it — has become obvious to a number of observers. There are now calls for the very idea of human rights to be re-thought.⁸ Who decides, and how can we decide, what is — and what is not — a human “right”? It has become far from “self-evident.”

In our “rights culture” various movements for social change — without much thought — or at least without argument — take the language of “rights” to describe their cause. Almost *any desirable outcome* can be called a “right.” Most prominent in recent times have been women’s “rights,” gay “rights,” and now trans “rights.” The abortion and euthanasia debates have been cast in terms of “rights” — on both sides. It is hardly an

⁷ Note the striking statement by Jacques Derrida: “... the concept of crime against humanity is a Christian concept and I think there would be no such thing in the law today without the Christian heritage, the Abrahamic heritage, the biblical heritage.” Jacques Derrida, “On Forgiveness. A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida,” moderated by Richard Kearny, in *Questioning God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 70, cited by Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just* (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, 2010), p. 167.

⁸ There was, for example, an article along these lines in the *Economist* in September 2019.

exaggeration to say that “rights” have become whatever the spokespeople for a group or a cause *want*.

This is part of the *intensity* of contemporary debates about social change. If it is about a “right” — a “human right” — that ups the ante considerably, and makes *consideration* of the change difficult or impossible. It makes the issue a matter of *justice*. Therefore only a *bad person* could disagree — someone who is on the side of *injustice*.

We have seen this in the same-sex marriage debates. Opponents were seen as not just resisting a change to the definition of marriage, or conserving the form of a valued social institution. They were denying people a *right* — making it about *justice* — and the denial of the wanted outcome *injustice*. And so many Christians found themselves feeling decidedly uncomfortable — because you *cannot* be indifferent to justice — righteousness — if you take the God who really is there seriously.

I have a theory — that one of the fundamental reasons that many people regard the Bible as offensive is that the Bible does not really support the “rights culture” *as it has developed*. One of the things we might find embarrassing about the Bible is that it does not teach — at least not explicitly and in these terms — “human *rights*.” The Bible is not a human *rights* document. Not really.

But that is because the Bible has a *better* way to understand the value and dignity of human life.

It is this. Human life is a *gift* given by God — out of his love. The appropriate attitude of those who have received this gift is *thankfulness*. And *being so loved* imbues human life with the wonderful dignity of *responsibility* — towards the One who has loved us *and* towards others who have been so loved.

How good is that!

The “rights culture” — as it has developed — leads to the divisions, demands and resentments that surround us. “*What do we want? ... When do we want it? ...*” The Biblical reality opens up the possibility of thankfulness, love, responsibility towards

others, and contentment. You could call it a “love culture.” It would not by any means be indifferent to injustice — but it might not see everything desired as a “right.”

This Christian way of thinking does not give immediate and simple answers to the issues of our times. I do not believe it means that we will automatically come down on one side or the other of any particular cause. But it does mean that we see human life in better terms than demanding or defending what we claim to be our rights.

Equality

The idea of human rights is closely tied to a second idea that has massive moral power today: *equality*. The two ideas are linked because the very notion of *human* rights entails *equal* rights.⁹ White people do not have more rights than black people. Men do not have more rights than women. Human rights — if they are *human* rights — apply equally everywhere to everyone.

Perhaps even more than “rights,” equality is widely accepted today (at least in Western societies) as a self-evident, natural, universal truth. And a *moral* truth. *Inequality is immoral.*

And again — for the avoidance of doubt or confusion — *an enormous amount of good has been accomplished in the name of equality.*

But, in a manner very similar to “rights,” equality is an important and good concept that has been *corrupted* by being detached from its roots.

It was the Christian conviction that all human life is created *in God's image* that gave to the world the astonishing — and in fact far from self-evident — idea of human equality. The case for this has been elegantly re-stated recently in Tom Holland's important book, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*.¹⁰ Holland makes clear that whatever debt we owe to the Greeks and the Romans, it is not for the idea of human equality. That

⁹ Historically the idea of human equality seems to have developed before the idea of human rights, the latter being dependent on the former. See Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Penguin Random House, 2014), p. 359.

¹⁰ Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (London: Little, Brown, 2019).

came from the gospel proclaimed by the apostle Paul. A similar argument has been presented lucidly in Larry Siedentop's 2014 volume, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*.¹¹ Before and apart from the influence of Christianity, cultures have been built on the far more obvious idea of the natural *inequality* of human beings.

But today the idea of equality has become the basis for *rejecting* much of Paul's teaching — and Bible teaching more generally — as morally offensive.

The offense taken at the idea of "submission" in marriage comes very largely from the sense that it is seen as a paradigm of inequality — and therefore deeply immoral.

What has happened?

The idea that we are equal before each other *because we are equal before God* — equally valued, equally loved, equally responsible, and so on — is — and historically has been — a very powerful truth. It enabled the poor to be seen as profoundly *equal* to the rich — the weak to the strong — the underprivileged to the privileged — and so on. Not to mention the equality of adults and infants, slaves and their masters, and the equality of people of different racial backgrounds. The consequences have been powerful. And continue to be. And how thankful we should be!

But what happens to that idea when we reject the God bit — that made the idea possible? If we are going to retain the idea of equality, it now has to reside in what humans have in common *in themselves*.

That is why Darwin's theory of evolution was so troubling to many — including Darwin. He saw that his notion of the "survival of the fittest" led to the troubling conclusion that "there had come to exist over the course of human existence a natural hierarchy of races."¹² And we all know where that led.

¹¹ Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Penguin Random House, 2014).

¹² Holland, p. 427.

Now *there's* a discussion that is difficult to get off the ground. Abandon God, and Darwin's theory *undermines* — I think *unavoidably* — the notion of human equality.

How can we hold onto the *equality* of human beings while abandoning the truth that gave us that idea?

The answer our world seems to have come up with is complicated — and perhaps still being worked out.¹³ After all, we also value “diversity” which means welcoming and affirming *differences* between people.

Perhaps “equality” just means “equal *rights*” for people regardless of differences. In that case it is not a surprise that “equality” has joined “rights” as a concept that finds much Bible teaching offensive. Although it was the Bible that gave us the most powerful basis for the profound equality of all people, the Bible does not fit well with what that concept of equality has become — any more than it fits with “rights” becoming merely desired outcomes.

The concept of equality has also contributed to the intensity of public debates. Once an issue is seen through the lens of “equality,” discussion is no longer calm. I mean, what kind of person is against *equality*? Only a bad person — a person who approves of *inequality*!

The same-sex marriage debate went along that line. Once it was defined as a matter of “marriage *equality*,” it was very difficult for an argument for “marriage *inequality*” to get off the ground. Only bad people would try! (So many good people didn't!)

But the concept of equality that Christianity gave the world is not threatened by human differences. Indeed it allows us to appreciate the goodness of difference without threatening equality. Women do not *have* to play rugby to be equal to men. (Nor do men for that matter!) Equality is deeper than being *the same*. All humans are made in the image of God — *equally* in the image of God. All humans are sinful and in need of

¹³ One famous essay recognised the problem with the idea of equality and argued (37 years ago!) that the concept of equality ought no longer to be appealed to. Peter Westen, “The Empty Idea of Equality,” *Harvard Law Review* 95/3 (1982), pp. 537-596; cited by Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (London: Hodder, 2010), p. 151.

salvation — *equally* sinful and *equally* in need of salvation. “God so loved *the world*” is a Biblical statement of human equality.

Our world’s idea of *equality* — as it has developed — has become expressed in competitiveness, assertiveness and resentment. The Biblical concept of human equality leads to “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”¹⁴

These two powerful ideas — human *rights* and *equality* — have changed the world — and are the beating heart of the moral framework that surrounds us today. But I am suggesting that they have become corrupted ideas by being detached from their source. The value and dignity of human life have been *reduced* to distorted ideas of *rights* and *equality*. And it is at least in part these corrupted ideas that have made it so difficult for our contemporaries to see the goodness of God’s ways.

The Bible tells a better — and more powerful — and more beautiful — story.

Let us briefly sketch out some further elements of the two stories.

2. What’s wrong?

The rights and equality culture sees *what’s wrong* in terms of the forces, laws, attitudes, behaviors, ideas that undermine or deny rights and equality — as now understood. This has led to a powerful concept of group “identity.”

Identity is *what defines us* — what makes us who we are — and therefore who it is with whom we *identify*.

In the old days we Christians used to be (rightly) critical of a culture in which identity was tied up with job, career, achievement, status and so on.

¹⁴ Cf. Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Penguin Random House, 2014), p. 353.

That's changed. Identity has become a way of speaking about *rights* and *equality* — more particularly a matter of rights *denied* and *inequality* experienced. And you are encouraged to identify with those who feel the same injustices.

The subject is too big for us to take on properly now, but a recent shocking critique of where such ideas are taking us can be found in Douglas Murray's *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity*.¹⁵

Suffice to say here that the Bible will teach us to see some of those forces, laws, attitudes, behaviors, ideas as wrong. But the Bible sees the problem as deeper. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn famously put it, “the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.” Our own individual sinfulness and selfishness have a whole lot to do with what is wrong and what is spoiled in human life. The blame cannot all be shifted. Our own sinfulness and selfishness rob us of thankfulness and contentment and the goodness of responsible living.

3. Solution

The *solution* sought by the rights and equality culture is liberation — *freedom* from the forces, laws, attitudes, behaviors, ideas that rob me of my rights and my equality — freedom from whatever prevents me being and doing whatever I want to be or do.

No wonder the Bible gives offense! Because the Bible sees that kind of “freedom” as nothing of the sort. It is *bondage* to selfishness. And selfishness spoils everything good about life. We could explore this at length, but not now.

Put simply the liberation brought by the gospel of Jesus Christ is freedom *from* selfishness, the freedom of *forgiveness*, freedom to be the children of God — freedom to live *no longer for yourself*. And that is brilliantly good.

The God of the Bible certainly cares about justice, he cares about suffering and he cares about cruelty and oppression. But what if he does not regard something you desire very much as a *right*, or some difference between the situations of you and someone else as

¹⁵ Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019).

an unjust *inequality*? And what if you see your *identity* in terms of those things? Then the Bible is challenging your very sense of identity. But it is also offering you a different and wonderfully liberating understanding of your identity. What if your identity is a child of God, loved, forgiven, and fellow heir with Christ? Better by far!

4. Goal

When the goal of human life is securing *rights*, achieving *equality* and exercising *freedom* (in the senses we have seen), then the path to happiness is *empowerment*. Turn the tables. The oppressed, the victims of injustice must gain power over those who have denied you your rights, robbed you of equality and restricted your freedom.

This understanding of life is reinforced by the fact that there *are* and *have* been oppressed people who suffer appalling injustices — and people who *have* exerted power over others in terrible ways. That is certainly true.

But if those are the categories in which you think about life — the powerful and the oppressed — because life is about rights and equality — and you see the path to happiness as turning the tables — then you cannot but hear a Bible word like “*submission*” *in those terms*. “*Submission*” then means being under the *power* of another. It is about being *dis-empowered*. It is about perpetuating the *problem* — not about the solution!

And that *is* offensive.

But if we understand our identity as forgiven sinners, belonging together because we are joined to Jesus Christ, loved by God, in whose image we have been made, then our relationships — like our relationship with God himself — are based on *love*, not *power*.

The Bible’s teaching is about Christian wives submitting to the *love* of their husbands. That may still cause offence, but it is altogether different from the idea of submitting to their *power* — which I do not believe the Bible teaches.

The Kingdom without the King

Someone has suggested that the problem with the western world today is that it wants *the Kingdom without the King*. I have found that a helpful way of putting it. The western world has learnt such things as the value of human life, the equality of all human beings, the pursuit of freedom, the importance of justice, and tolerance, and so on — these values have come very largely from the historic influence of the Bible on western cultures. They are, we could say, aspects of the Kingdom of which the Bible speaks. As our world has rejected the God of the Bible, it has clung onto many of these values of the Kingdom. Or tried to. We want the Kingdom without the King.

But without the King, the Kingdom is distorted and corrupted. The result is an understanding that actually finds the Kingdom of God offensive. The kingdom our world wants — the kingdom without the King — is a different kingdom — and, it must be said, is not good.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by returning to the example I have mentioned several times. “Wives submit to your husbands” (Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18; 1 Peter 3:1).

The distorted ideas of rights, equality, freedom and power *hears* these words as meaning some combination of the following —

that wives should be *oppressed* by their husbands,

that wives should be *less free* than their husbands,

that wives should be *dependent* and husbands *independent*,

that husbands have *rights*, but wives do *not*,

that husbands are *superior* to their wives.

Let us be clear: those ideas *are offensive*.¹⁶ And we are not being faithful and Biblical if we give the impression that this is what the Bible teaches.

We could say something similar about many aspects of the Bible's teaching.

But as we learn not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds — we see a very different vision for human life, in which we can appreciate the goodness, for example, of the call to submit to the love of another. We learn to *discern* the will of God, and to see how it is good and acceptable and perfect (see Romans 12:2).¹⁷

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¹⁶ While preparing this paper I came across an article that provides a typical example of this offense by Vicki Lowik and Annabel Taylor of CQUniversity Australia: "Evangelical churches believe men should control women. That's why they breed domestic violence." *The Conversation*, December 9, 2019.

¹⁷ In this paper I have briefly considered how the concepts of rights, equality, identity, freedom and power have been distorted by being disconnected from the reality that made possible much of our historic understanding of these things, namely the God of the Bible. Other important ideas in the moral thinking of the world today that could be similarly considered, include individualism, justice, diversity and tolerance.