

# THE ALEPH COURSE : Notes for talking.

## 5 : SOURCES.

LAST TIME – we looked for EVIDENCE.

But we DIDN'T FIND ANY approaching persuasive arguments.

Which is RIDICULOUS. Isn't it ?

What have Christians been doing for the last 2000 years ? What about the Bible ? – and the church ? – and generations of Christian scholars ? Surely I can't just choose to throw away two millennia of development ?

The scientists start with Galileo et al., and trace the development step by step from there to the present day. Why should Christianity be different ?

That is FAIR COMMENT, and deserves some sort of answer. This is my attempt at providing it.

BUT FIRST –

Recall the point I made last week :

There isn't much point in raking up the history if there's  
nothing to suggest that God is still up and running today.

I suggested that there's at least hearsay evidence that God is there and active today : lives are changed, things happen in some remarkable ways.

And ( given the assumption that FAITH IS IMPORTANT ) we can make sense of that. So now perhaps it's sensible to look a bit more deeply into traditional sources.

WHAT SOURCES ?

The BIBLE is perhaps the source most often mentioned. That's comparatively recent; it depends on cheap printing and widespread literacy for the coverage it has today.

The CHURCH was the earlier common source, from which many Christians learnt about their religion. It could reasonably be hoped to embody the experience of Christian practice through the centuries.

The THEOLOGIANS have also been active throughout – in other areas of endeavour we find that scholarship and study can help to widen our knowledge and understanding, so why not in Christianity too ?

Those are the traditional sources. They are comprehensible, comfortably controllable, more or less familiar in nature.

But there's another, not at all controllable, and likely to surprise us : GOD. Christian experience is that – as reported in the Bible and other writings – God does communicate with us. We'll therefore say a bit about God too.

QUESTIONS TO ASK :

- CAN we believe it ? ( correctness, reliability );
- MUST we believe it ? ( authority )

THE BIBLE.

Old Testament : Jewish scriptures. History, teaching, etc.

New Testament : specifically Christian – we'll concentrate on it. History, teaching, etc.

Contents settled by the Quinisextine council, 691, after a long period ( centuries ) of shuffling and choosing.

Evidence suggests ( they tell me ) that what we have now in Greek is likely to be pretty close to what was originally written down, so it's reasonably RELIABLE. ( It is not quite so clear how well we've been served by translators. )

It is not quite so obvious that we know it's CORRECT.

For the HISTORY ( gospels, Acts ) : did the original writers report events as they happened, record sayings accurately, etc. ? Much debate over whether they might have used Jewish literary forms unfamiliar to us.

For the teaching ( letters ) : is the theology worked out as it should be ? ( – whatever that means. )

How can we tell ? We can't go back to check. There's some internal evidence :

CONSISTENCY ( in the synoptic gospels ) is fairish, but a long way from perfect, and the events are shuffled. Perhaps that's what you'd expect from accounts written down some years after the event ? But John's gospel is different. They're not transcripts of a tape.

REASONING ( throughout ) is not always up to the standard I expect of my students. Sometimes ( Paul's epistles come to mind ) "because I say so".

Is it AUTHORITATIVE ? I don't know of any reason to suppose that you MUST accept its authority. That's a matter of choice. It usually goes with another choice, between :

The Bible was written by people  
and  
The Bible was ( essentially ) written by God.

Some Christian traditions insist that the Bible is directly inspired by God, and totally reliable; others don't. What's the difference ? – a VERY CONDENSED DISCUSSION.

IF GOD WROTE THE BIBLE :

- Then presumably we have to believe it. That I don't find it easy doesn't make it wrong.
- Then the apparent inconsistencies must really be consistent – but how do we work them out ? ( Order of creation; Cain's wife; ( more serious ) Adam's sin; inheritance of guilt. )
- Then it's a pity that He didn't inspire the translators a bit more consistently.

IF PEOPLE WROTE THE BIBLE :

- Then different views indicate developing ideas of God.
- Then we can't be sure that it's all right. ( Must we throw it all away ? – a fundamentalist view. Not unreasonable to believe that the writers wrote in good faith, and were honest by their own lights. )
- It's still a pity about the translators.

HOW COULD YOU TELL ?

It LOOKS like a collection of books written by people. But that isn't evidence; even the staunchest advocates of a divine origin for the Bible accept that it was written by people under God's inspiration. ( And those who believe it was written by people are quite happy with inspiration too. )

What tests might one apply ? Does God leave fingerprints ? ( DNA ? ) I've heard two arguments along these lines.

CONSISTENCY : Only God could ensure that people writing over a space of several hundred years would produce material which cohered so well. That would be more plausible if there had been no selection process, but for both Testaments the canon was laid down by people who accepted some writings and rejected others.

PROPHECY : There are all these prophecies, particularly those in the Old Testament which apply to Jesus, which turned out centuries later to be right. Well, yes, but there were a lot of others that didn't – the Jews were surprised by Jesus, and they weren't stupid – and even with the "accepted" prophecies you sometimes have to be careful to pick just the right words ( *Isaiah* 7.14-16 ).

## SO DO WE BELIEVE IT OR NOT ?

I suggest that isn't the point. I'd rather not regard the Bible as a SOURCE of profound Christian principles. There are certainly questions to be asked about its authority ( unless you simply accept that as an assumption ).

I think that the Bible is a WITNESS from people of FAITH who have been able to interpret their lives in the light of their faith, and through their experiences have learnt about God.

## THE CHURCH.

Its traditions, teachings, practices – the accumulated wisdom of about 2000 years ?

Certainly a lot of it. That's what you'd expect. Not as famous as the Bible, and not as conveniently accessible. There is undoubtedly lots of treasure, but it's not much use if it just lies there.

The ACCESSIBLE signs of the church, and therefore its more powerful witness ( what I do, not what I say ) are its ORGANISATIONS and its PEOPLE. And these are a mixed bag.

The bits that get REPORTED ( commonly MISREPORTED, but we have to put up with that ) are usually the more or less spectacularly silly bits.

We DO HEAR about big issues that are not well handled – Galileo and evolution are historical examples, women priests and homosexual people might be current examples. At the moment, because of the Christian Heritage party, everyone knows that the church favours the death penalty. But NOBODY COMMENTS much on the Christmas and Easter messages from Christian leaders which used to appear in the *Herald*, but are now very much reduced.

We DO HEAR about the unsavoury things that the church does ( or seems to do ) – the crusades and the inquisition in history, over-zealous missionaries, cases of abuse, and complacency ( second war Germany ) are comparatively modern. But NOBODY COMMENTS much about the long-term welfare services of many sorts, the personal ministry which goes on all the time, and the support for many lives.

In fact, few or none of these are as simple as they're made out to be, and neither are the people involved. Yes, we're human; yes, we make mistakes.

So, yes, WE'RE NOT RELIABLE. The church isn't a SOURCE of profound principles either. They're there, but sometimes they're a bit mixed with current biases and popular ideas.

I think that the church is a FAMILY, not a database. And it's a HOME where you can be with brothers and sisters.

## THE THEOLOGIANS.

Sound academic principle : if you have a problem, study it. That's what theologians do.

Apart from failure, there are two sorts of result :

- The problem is *solved*. ( "How can we make buildings that don't fall down in earthquakes ?" ) This happens in cases where the problem has a specific goal, and the goal is attainable.
- The problem is *clarified*. ( "How many angels can dance on the point of a needle ?" ) This happens in cases where the problem is caused by confusion or misunderstanding.

Theological problems are rarely of the first kind. The second kind is far more common, because of the nature of the subject. As we've noticed, it is built on assumptions, and your conclusions are determined by the set of assumptions you choose. Experiments are difficult ( impossible, if there's anything in the burglarology argument ), and in any case the experimental material ( people, at least ) is so complicated that many interpretations are possible.

On its good days, theology can clarify ideas, show which assumptions lead to which conclusions, and make sure that the arguments are honest.

On its bad days, theologians turn out to be just as biased and pig-headed as the rest of us, and make arbitrary assumptions which they don't justify :

"We know now that it cannot make sense to think that, at one point in human history, a God conceived of as in some way apart from all else 'sent' his son."

( Senior lecturer, theology, St Andrews; *Guardian*, 1996 November 2; *Real World* #12, 1997 April. )  
Arrant nonsense.

And *that's* why I don't think it's a useful SOURCE.

GOD.

My other "sources" are human, controllable, comprehensible. And I can safely be rude about them if it seem justified.

God is at least potentially different on all those counts.

BUT Christians have always believed that God can, and does, communicate with us, and we with Him. We speak of God's revelation of Himself, His guidance, His inspiration, His effect on our lives – and we use those terms seriously because we have personal evidence that they are real. That is rarely, if ever, measurable evidence.

And I am sure that prayer about problems is a better way of resolving them than theology.

And I am here now because of what I believe were examples of God showing me the way forward. I went through these arguments at a point of despair, found all sources except God unreliable, and was forced to turn to God for answers. And He gave them to me.

ON THE OTHER HAND, I have heard other people claiming messages from God which I find ( to say the least ) surprising. Are they imagining messages from God to suit their convenience ? Was I imagining messages from God to suit my convenience ?

ANYWAY –

That's why I haven't relied on traditional sources : they DON'T GIVE THE SIMPLE STATEMENTS I WANT. ( Compare psychology, sociology ? – not models of clarity and universal agreement either. )

DOES IT MATTER ?

Not a lot, I suspect. We're not called to be RIGHT, but to be LOVING and FAITHFUL. ( Perhaps we can't be right – the whole truth might be too complicated for us. )

And keep in mind that IT WORKS.