

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 21 April 2013

No. T0777

Speaker: Dr. Yannick Ford

Challenges to the Gospel in the 21st Century: The challenge of relevance

Is the Christian Gospel relevant today? This is one of the major challenges to the Gospel that we face in the western world. Not surprisingly, it has probably always been a challenge to some degree or other. This is well illustrated by the interaction between the Apostle Paul and the Roman governor Festus. In Acts 21:26 Paul entered the temple in Jerusalem, but he was set upon by many of the Jews (Acts 21:29). The Roman soldiers delivered Paul from them, but Paul was now a prisoner of the Romans.

As you will see if you read Acts 21:1-26:32, Paul's arrest caused quite a stir! He was sent with a heavily armed guard to Caesarea, because a plot to ambush Paul and kill him had been foiled by Paul's nephew (see Acts 23:11-22). Paul was thus transferred to the responsibility of the Roman governor Felix (see Acts 23:23-35). In Acts 24:11-21, Paul gives his defence before Felix, but Felix kept Paul as a prisoner, although with quite some liberty (Acts 24:22-23). We will come back to Felix later, as his attitude can teach us some useful things relating to our study about the challenge of relevance. However, for now let's look at the next Roman governor, Festus. In Acts 24:27 we read the following: "When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favour, Felix left Paul in prison" (English Standard Version). So, Festus is the new governor. How will he react to Paul?

In Acts 25:1, we see that one of the first things Festus did as the new governor was to go to Jerusalem. Let's look at Acts 25:1-12. Bear with me as I read these verses, because we need to see the context so that we can properly understand Festus' attitude towards Jesus, which can tell us a lot about this issue of the challenge of relevance. "Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, asking as a favour against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem - because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way. Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. 'So,' said he, 'let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him.' After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove. Paul argued in his defence, 'Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offence.' But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favour, said to Paul, 'Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?' But Paul said, 'I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar.' Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, 'To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go'" (Acts 25:1-12, English Standard Version).

Paul had used his privilege as a Roman citizen to appeal to the Emperor, and so Festus ordered that Paul would go to Caesar. Before that happened, however, we see that Paul again gave his defence, because King Agrippa and his wife Bernice came to see Governor Festus.

Let's read on in Acts 25:13-21: "Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus. And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, 'There is a man left prisoner by Felix, and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face and had opportunity to make his defence concerning the charge laid against him. So when they came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought. When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them. But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar'" (Acts 25:13-21, English Standard Version).

Acts 25:19 is the key verse here for our subject - notice what Governor Festus says: "they had certain points of dispute with him [that is, Paul] about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive." This whole case seems to be rather a headache for the governor! It is relevant to him in that he needs to deal with this prisoner and come to a final verdict, but the nature of the charges brought against Paul are very foreign to him. As far as Festus is concerned, they are "certain points of dispute" about the Jews' religion, and they centre on the Person of Jesus Christ, who appears to be of absolutely no relevance to Festus. He describes Him as "a certain Jesus", and states that He is dead, although Paul seems to think that He is alive. We can't necessarily work out what Festus was thinking when he said these things, but I wonder whether he thought that the whole thing was slightly ridiculous.

When Paul again delivers his defence, this time before King Agrippa, Governor Festus interrupts, as we can see in Acts 26:24: "And as he was saying these things in his defence, Festus said with a loud voice, 'Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind'" (English Standard Version).

Governor Festus' attitude is an excellent illustration of the challenge that the Gospel appears to be irrelevant. Festus appeared to know very little about the Lord Jesus, only that He had died - and as far as Festus was concerned, He must therefore still be dead. Paul had spoken about the resurrection from the dead, which was nonsense as far as Festus was concerned - hence his interruption that Paul was out of his mind (Acts 26:24). Festus doesn't seem to have been particularly antagonistic towards Paul - he rather felt that Paul was not really a criminal, as we see in Acts 26:30-32: "Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, 'This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.' And Agrippa said to Festus, 'This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar'" (English Standard Version).

Festus probably thought that Paul was an intellectual who had become slightly unhinged with all his studies on arcane matters of religion, which had little or nothing to do with modern, daily life. And this is one of the main reasons why the Gospel often seems irrelevant to men and women today. Why is this?

There are several probable reasons. Last week we considered the challenge of science. A common thought is that the universe came into being without the existence of God, and that life evolved. If there is no God, and no after-life, then why worry about the Christian Gospel? It would seem irrelevant. Next week we will look at the challenge of prosperity. Prosperity also makes the Gospel seem irrelevant. Things are fine as they are. Why worry about an after-life, of which we know nothing? Let's concentrate on today. What other reasons are there that make the Christian Gospel seem irrelevant? There is a shift away from moral absolutes. If there is no God to answer to, if there is no God who sets an absolute standard of right and wrong, who is to say that something is evil? What basis should we use for morality? And why should we brand certain things as sin before God, if they are accepted by the general population? The Christian Gospel, showing how we can be forgiven for our sins will seem irrelevant if sin is not considered as a serious issue. Then there are competing world views - who is to say that Christianity is right? There are many competing religions out there. And finally, miracles, resurrection from the dead, and an after-life can all seem ridiculous and foolish - just as Festus thought.

How can we respond to such challenges? How can we show that the Gospel is indeed highly relevant? One way in which we can help our family and friends, neighbours and colleagues, is to show that **God is very relevant to us in our lives**. There are several passages in the Bible that encourage us in this way. In His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-7:29), Jesus said: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16 English Standard Version).

This is not easy to do, as I know very well from my own experience. It is far easier to blend in with the crowd. I find it hard to be different, and even harder to explain why. Nevertheless, these verses show that by living a life in which God is relevant to us, we will shine a light on others. They will probably be curious!

This curiosity is expressed in two verses from the Apostle Peter's letters: "but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15, English Standard Version). "For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead" (1 Peter 4:3-5, English Standard Version).

Peter tells us that we should always be ready to explain the hope that we have, 1 Peter 3:15. It is a good thing to have some thoughts prepared for this, so that we are able to clearly and confidently explain **why** we believe **what** we

believe. 1 Peter 4:3-5 shows us that living a life in which God is relevant to us will cause surprise, and may well lead to questions - hence the need to be prepared to explain the hope that is in us.

If we lead a life in which God is relevant, then obviously we will be living a life in which the **Bible** is relevant. This is important too. A key verse is Hebrews 4:12: "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (English Standard Version).

Hebrews 4:12 tells us what we, as Christians, know to be true - the Word of God is not just a book. It is **living and active**, and it will have an effect on those who read it. It is the agent that God uses to bring about new life. We see this in James 1:18: "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (James 1:18 English Standard Version).

Floyd Schneider, in his book *"Evangelism for the Fainthearted"* (ISBN: 9780825437953), recommends making people curious enough to want to read the Bible with us. He maintains that if someone is interested enough to read the text, for example the Gospel of John, even if only to see what it actually says, then the Word of God, which is living and active, will have its own effect. It is an appealing and interesting method.

The point is that the Bible is indeed highly relevant to us today. It is in the Bible that we find the answers - real answers - to our deepest needs. And many of the reasons that we looked at earlier as to why the Gospel **seems** irrelevant don't seem so persuasive when the status quo is rocked, or if we take the time to think through our assumptions more clearly, and to look beneath the surface. If life evolved and the universe just happened, why is there so much evidence of design and fine tuning in the universe? And why do we seem to crave a reason for our existence, a reason for living that satisfies? Prosperity - it's all very well while it lasts, but what about when there is a financial crash, or a war, or other unforeseen event? Where can we find stability? There may be a lack of moral absolutes, but there is often a popular backlash against seeming injustice in the world, seeming impotence to deal with criminality and unfair dealing. Certainly if someone was to commit a crime against **us**, we would want to see justice done! Miracles, resurrection from the dead, and an after-life can all seem ridiculous and foolish - but if we have a life-threatening disease, or a bereavement, we may well feel that there must be more to life than just blind chance. Death very often seems shocking, unexpected - and yet it is one of the commonest things in the world. While the Lord Jesus has not yet returned, it will happen to us all (see Hebrews 9:27).

The Bible provides a coherent explanation for all these things, and makes sense of the world that we live in. It explains why parts of the world and life are so good, and parts of the world and life are so bad - and so seemingly inexplicable otherwise. It explains why people do bad things, and why good people often appear to suffer. It explains why the world as we see it shows the hallmarks of wonderful design, and yet why nature can seem so cruel. It explains why God is good, and yet why the state of affairs in this world is so far from perfect, while we live in the day of grace - God's amnesty in which there is time for us to repent and get right with Him.

We come finally to another reason why the Christian gospel is often considered as irrelevant. It is true that the Bible gives a proper explanation for life, and that its message will meet our deepest needs. But Christianity and the Bible have been quite widely rejected in the western world. At the start of this message, we considered the Roman governor Festus. He hadn't necessarily rejected the Christian message of the Apostle Paul in the sense of knowing it well and yet turning away. To him, the whole thing seemed like nonsense. His predecessor, the governor Felix, was a different case. In Acts 24, Paul is defending himself before Felix. Let's pick up the account from Acts 24:22: "But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way, put them off, saying, 'When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case.' Then he gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs. After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, 'Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you.' At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him" (Acts 24:22-26, English Standard Version).

Felix, unlike Festus, was said to have "a rather accurate knowledge of the Way" (Acts 24:22). At that time, followers of Jesus were known as followers of the Way (see Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14). Felix had married a Jewish lady, Drusilla (Acts 24:24), and so would probably have been aware of the general principles of God as revealed in the Old Testament. Felix did not like the message of the Gospel - it bothered him and alarmed him. Festus found the whole thing nonsensical, but Felix appears to have found it scary!

Now we know that on the one hand, we can do nothing for our salvation - the work has been done by the Lord Jesus, and even our faith is a gift from God, as we can read in Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (English Standard Version).

On the other hand, the Gospel does require a response from us - we are to believe it and act accordingly, as Paul says in Acts 20:21: "testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (English Standard Version). It is this response that can seem like a stumbling block, and why arguments for irrelevance can seem attractive. There is no record in the Bible that Felix ever attended to the Gospel as preached by Paul, although "he sent for him often and conversed with him" as we read in Acts 24:26.

So what conclusions can we draw from our study today about the challenge of relevance? Let's be encouraged to lead lives in which God is relevant to us, and His Word is relevant to us. Let's be ready to give a good explanation of the hope that is within us (see 1 Peter 3:15). I like Floyd Schneider's approach in seeking to make people curious enough to read the Bible with us - let us seek and pray for opportunities for others to read the Bible, so that the Word of God can have its effect in their lives, and so that we can share the tremendous blessing that we have with them. Let's remember that the Christian faith has been largely rejected, so that there is a further challenge to show how something considered as outdated is still of great relevance, but let us not forget that God is the same as He ever has been, and that the salvation of men and women is His work, and we can count on His grace, His love, and His power.

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