I'M NOT AN IDIOT OR A HERETIC

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To be honest, it's more than a little galling to be told that I don't take the Bible seriously by people who wouldn't know a hapax legomenon if it bit them on the nose.
Category: Observations

OK, I will admit that I sometimes act idiotically, but that is a different story!

This is the fourth in my series considering some issues related to my own ecclesiastical background. In this post, I'd like to consider the way in which people can react in the face of disagreement on certain issues.

One of the ways in which people from my section of the church describe themselves is as Bible People (in passing, I sometimes think that we are more sermon people than Bible people, but that is by the by). This ties in with with the evangelical emphasis on biblicism mentioned in an earlier post in this series. However, my concern is that sometimes we appear to claim an exclusivity to the interpretation and understanding of Scripture which then gives us the right to marginalise and belittle others who see things differently.

Let me give a couple of examples from my own experience. Contrary to many people from my conservative background, I am an egalitarian (which means I believe that women can minister in the church in the same roles as men) and I also don't believe that Genesis teaches that God created the universe in a literal six day period. In many parts of evangelicalism, neither of these two would be at all controversial, but within my "tribe" they are unusual positions, to say the least.

I want to say, in passing, that it is not my intention to defend either of these positions in depth, nor to try and convince others to adopt them. I simply use them as examples of the way that people can marginalise those who hold differing opinions.

To be honest, I rarely discuss my position on these two issues. In my church context it would not be appropriate to do so and to be honest, I have no desire to create argument or controversy. However, one implication of this is that over the years, I have been able to listen to the way in which different people describe the positions I hold.

I have heard both positions described as stupid and I regularly hear that people only hold to these ideas because they have given way to the prevailing culture and don't take the Bible seriously. If I do let slip that I hold these positions, then very often I'm faced with a barrage of proof texts, because apparently, I've never read Romans 5 or 1 Timothy 2 and if only I did, I would quickly see the error of my ways.

The thing is, I fully understand why people don't believe that women should hold teaching and

authority roles in church, or that the earth was created in six literal days. I understand this, because I used to firmly hold both positions, myself. I have walked out of a church because a woman was preaching; I was that zealous! On the evolution thing, I understand the issues extremely well, I have a degree and three years' post-graduate experience as a biologist and have co-authored numerous papers in the field. However, during all of this time, I held to a six-day creation position. Far from caving in to the prevailing culture, I didn't shift my position on the early chapters of Genesis until decades after I stopped working in biology.

During my last two years at school and my undergraduate studies, I read all of the creation versus evolution books that I could find, and there were a lot of them, it was a growth market in the late 70s. I found a lot that was helpful in maintaining my confidence in the received reading of Genesis, but a fair bit that was confusing. Far too much of the literature was critiquing a view of evolution that no one was teaching or believing in the first place. I remember one book in particular that was very popular in my church circles that even as a sixth former, I could see right through. As my knowledge and understanding of biology grew, I became less impressed by the "scientific" critiques of evolution raised by Christian authors. I grew to believe (and still do) that if you want to criticise evolution from a Christian viewpoint, then you should do so on the basis of Christian teachings about the nature of man and our experience as fallen beings. Trying to argue scientifically against evolution was bringing a knife to a gunfight. We just simply didn't have the right expertise on our side. However, this did not shake my view that Genesis 1-3 was too be taken as a literal account of creation.

What changed my mind on this issue was becoming exposed to Christians from different backgrounds and cultures who read texts like Genesis from a different set of presuppositions than the ones I brought to the reading. In short, I'm just no longer convinced that post-enlightenment views of what constitutes truth and how documents and stories function are the best way to get to grips with Genesis. Others disagree with me and that is fine, I'm not here to convince anyone. However, my view emerged from a long wrestling with the nature of Scripture and the way in which hermeneutics is understood. Please don't accuse me of not taking the Bible seriously or throw proof texts at me.

My journey on the subject of women in authority was rather different. My first doubts on the subject came when I saw that some churches that would not allow women to teach at home, were perfectly happy to allow women missionaries to teach overseas. At the very least, I saw a tinge of inconsistency there. However, the tipping point was when I had to get to grips with 1 Timothy 2:12 - the famous verse saying that women shouldn't teach or have authority over men. My problem was that if Paul meant that women shouldn't have authority over men, why didn't he say so? The thing is, the word he uses in this verse is not the usual word for authority. What he uses is a word that is not found elsewhere in Scripture and very rarely in other classical Greek texts. We aren't 100% sure what

it means, but it certainly doesn't simply mean authority, whatever our translations say. Try this article for one take on it. From here, I started to consider texts such as Romans 12 which (to my reading) seem to indicate that women could have considerable teaching authority in Paul's view. Again, I'm not trying to convince anyone to my views, I'm simply pointing out that I shifted my position on this question through reading the Scriptures.

So why am I getting into this? There are a a few reasons.

The first thing I'd like to say is that we need to move away from automatically saying that people who don't agree with us are not taking the Bible seriously. It's quite possible that they aren't, but that is not necessarily the case. Frankly, I would argue that someone like me who has wrestled with the text and changed his views is taking the Bible far more seriously than someone who parrots received views without ever digging into some of the complexities and nuances that are inevitably involved in interpreting Scripture (of course, I'm not suggesting that this is the case for everyone - far from it).

I'd also add that I don't think folks from a reformed-conservative position realise how hurtful some of their rhetoric about others and their views can be (I frankly think that a significant number don't even care). No, I'm not an idiot and I'm not a heretic, but I've heard those who believe what I believe referred to as both. To be honest, it's more than a little galling to be told that I don't take the Bible seriously by people who wouldn't know a *hapax legomenon* if it bit them on the nose.

However, a theme that is more important than my sense of irritation is that way that we disciple young people to go into the wider world. We have a tendency to teach people a system in which we have everything sorted because we know the Bible. We have answers to every possible objection and a certainty about what the Bible teaches that brooks no argument. The problem is that we often have answers to questions that people are not actually asking and we have no answers to some real questions. Also, there are people out there who know the Bible just as well as we do (if not better) who believe very different things to us. Our discipling needs to have a bit of humility and respect for others. The problem with an airtight, we have all the answers system is that once it gets undermined, it is too easy for the whole edifice to come crashing down. I've seen it happen more than once. We need disciples who are deeply rooted in Christ, who have the tools to engage with our culture and Scripture, rather than just proof texts and simplistic answers.

I know there are those who will react to this by saying that I've gone wishy-washy and liberal (thereby proving my point), but I'm ok with that. However, if we are going to learn to reach a post-Christian, post-everything generation with the gospel, and see a truly catholic church united in faith

in Christ, we are going to have to learn how to engage with people in a much less dogmatic fashion.