

Dear Friends,

I usually try to avoid using my position to make political statements and this pastoral email will be no exception. However, after pundits saying for years that religion has had its day, and is largely irrelevant in the public sphere, I was interested to read that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has introduced a particular religious element into the US presidential election process. He has made a speech from Jerusalem which is seemingly designed to attract the votes of American Christians who support Christian Zionism. He has even referred to the Rapture, which some Christians believe will be associated with the Return of Christ. And so, it may be timely for me to comment of the religious aspect of the US election process.

Some years ago, it became a trend to use the Scofield Bible. This was a study Bible that adopted an approach called Dispensationalism, which held that God has dealt with people differently in different periods of time, called dispensations. This teaching was largely responsible for the spread of the 19th century teaching on the Rapture, which was popularised in the 20th century, especially in the USA, by a series of books called “Left Behind”. A recent poll found that a large percentage of Americans continue to believe in the Rapture. It is also a teaching promulgated in the UK and other countries by the Plymouth Brethren and other Christian sects. It is also favoured by those who support Christian Zionism in the USA, who are part of what is often called, “the religious right”.

The remarkable thing is that this teaching, which was unknown to such great theologians as Polycarp, Ignatius, St Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, or Wesley is now featuring in the USA presidential election and referred to by no less a figure than Mike Pompeo! The challenge for us is to consider the extent to which it reflects a balanced understanding of Biblical teaching, especially prophecy.

Some years ago, I convened a remarkably interesting study group comprised of local preachers. Together we worked through a book called “*Grasping God’s Word, A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting and Applying the Bible*” by J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays. The essence of the book was to explore a methodology for exegesis – the drawing out of meaning from the Scriptures. The method used involved a careful observation of the text, looking at the

meaning of scripture in its original setting, identifying universal principles, and suggesting the meaning for our own context.

I feel that today, more than ever, we need to cultivate the skill of Biblical exegesis, so that we can properly interpret the Bible and discern whether the interpretations that are referenced by public figures are authentic and reliable. At the very simplest, we draw out the meaning of a text by looking at the “3 C”s. Look at the context of the passage, examine the content of the passage and formulate the consequences (or application) of the passage. Only through the use of a disciplined, careful examination of scripture can we hope to arrive at its true teaching and critique the various ideologies and doctrines that go in and out of fashion.

The point that I am labouring is this: beware of those who make loose, general references to the Bible, or quote isolated texts out of context in order to persuade you of the validity of their argument, be it political or theological! The Bible is not to be used to score points in an argument, but is there to be properly understood and applied to our own situation in a way that sits comfortably with the broader teaching of Scripture as it has been widely understood by the great teachers and scholars of the Church down through the ages. Read in this way we will find new ways in which it resonates with our own experience and understanding.

As Paul writes to Timothy, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realise what is wrong with our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work” 2 Tim 3:16,17 (NLT).

May God bless you,

Keith.

Keith C. Beckingham, Superintendent minister