

Gospel as Credible Truth and Necessity – Part 1

I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed *through* faith *for* faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

Romans 1: 16-17

[Father]... now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word... I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. For they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

John 17:13-14a, 15-19

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It was great to have the opportunity to take some time out to re-charge and reflect upon my ministry, and I want to sincerely thank you as parishioners for supporting me in this.

Over the next couple of weeks before Advent and our build-up to Christmas, I want to share with you some things which have come to me over the last four months as being both refreshing and challenging. I especially want to talk about the Gospel as both *credible truth* and *necessity*.

Today I want to focus on just one aspect of the Gospel as credible truth...

One of the tasks I set myself for my study leave was to work through Richard Bauckham's lengthy tome *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses ~ The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. Bauckham is a widely published scholar in theology, historical theology and New Testament studies. He is currently working on New Testament Christology and the Gospel of John as a Senior Scholar at Ridley Hall, Cambridge. Until 2007 he was Professor of New Testament Studies and Bishop Wardlaw Professor at the University of St Andrews. The point I am making here is that Bauckham is a widely respected scholar within the academic establishment, he is no fringe dweller.

All the more astonishing then, that against the trend in New Testament and biblical studies since the C19<sup>th</sup>, Bauckham has published a work which, simply put, argues that the "Gospels put us in close touch with the eyewitnesses of the history of Jesus. [That] the Gospel writers, in their different ways, present their Gospels as based upon and incorporating the testimony of the eyewitnesses"<sup>1</sup> to the events surrounding Jesus.

Such an assertion stands against the vast weight of 'form critical' scholarship (the basis of the work of the much publicized *Jesus Seminar*, for instance), which asserts the early Christian traditions circulated anonymously in communities that are viewed as if they were faceless collectives. Consequently, it is asserted, these traditions mostly tell us about the consciousness of the early church and the issues it faced in its common life, rather than anything reliable about Jesus himself – his origins or what he did and said. The conclusion is that we can know very little about Jesus and, by extension, any tradition of his resurrection to

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Eerdmans 2006, p.472.

the right hand of God is little more than invention – however sincerely held.

Bauckham thinks this sort of approach to the Gospels is deeply flawed. He suggests instead that there *were*, in fact, *personal links* between *known and named* carriers of the Jesus traditions, to whom these recollections were formed into ‘Gospels’.

There is no time here to go into the details of Bauckham’s sprawling and impressive argument which drags in support from many quarters as well as his own specialist field. Suffice to say that his work has blown up a storm in Gospel studies which will go for years yet before the dust even begins to settle. As one reviewer has written, “There are books that are interesting, there are books that are important and then there are seminal studies that serve as road markers for the field, pointing the way forward. Richard Bauckham’s *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* is in the latter category, to be sure.”<sup>2</sup> If Bauckham is right, an awful lot of other people are wrong and much New Testament study over the last 150 years has been barking up the wrong tree.

I am reminded of a huge painting by Brent Wong, in surrealist style, which hung for years in the Student Union building at Victoria. It was of a young woman leaping over a stylised landscape (some of you may remember it). Above both the woman and the land, hangs an improbable structure that suggests a modern castle built of steel yet floating in space without foundation. At some point in the early seventies, someone larking about in the stairwell in which it hung, put a rugby ball through it. The hole stayed there for years, badly patched over with some plaster.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bib-arch.org/reviews/revieweyewitness.asp>

There couldn't, surely, be a better image encapsulating Bauckham's critique of modern Gospel studies: here is scholarship as a permanently suspended leap of faith, somehow linked to an impressive edifice (a self-referential scholarly tradition, one piece built upon another), yet without questioning of its fundamental assumptions. Badly damaged and patched up it hangs in the midst of the academy anyway, neglected, of little interest to most, well over due to be taken down.

It's always fun to read an academic who validates your own prejudices and in this respect one must always be careful. Bauckham's "road markers" are just that: a broad outline of a different direction scholarship, which otherwise seems to be largely past its 'use by' date, needs to explore.

Yet, in the end the Gospels and the New Testament documents that support them are for us God's word *not* because an academic gives us permission to believe but because through reading the words of scripture, we really can encounter the crucified and risen Jesus who "lived among us full of grace and truth".<sup>3</sup>

Bauckham's thesis is not the basis to justify our belief in the Jesus of scripture. But it *is* to remind us that we can have good grounds to approach scripture with an attitude of *trust* rather than suspicion.<sup>4</sup> This does not mean, that we should blindly give the bible a free pass on everything, or that we should never ask questions of the text. But it does mean that, fundamentally, our call is to "hear" the bible, not argue with it. Our reading of the scripture should model and foster trust in God.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>4</sup> See Richard Hayes: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1>

<sup>5</sup> See blog by Jeff Lam responding Richard Hayes', *Joy Comes in the Morning – A hermeneutic of Trust* <http://jklam.wordpress.com/2008/04/03/a-hermeneutic-of-trust/>

They early witnesses to Jesus' life and death and resurrection were as astonished and amazed at what they heard and saw as we would have been had *we* been there as witnesses. It was against the grain that people like doubting Thomas confessed Jesus as risen from the dead, and so "my Lord and my God."<sup>6</sup> The eyewitnesses to "the events which were fulfilled among us",<sup>7</sup> were no fools. Even "while in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering,"<sup>8</sup> they told and re-told and fashioned their testimony to the truth of what they had seen and heard from Jesus himself.

When we read the Gospels we read reliable testimony to what Jesus said and did – this is no less true of Jesus' bodily resurrection and ascension. When we read the Gospels, then, we are very close to the resurrected, ever-living Jesus we worship as Lord.

Yes, this is only apprehended through faith born of God's Spirit. But the Jesus story is no fanciful tale generated from a persecuted church for its comfort. Rather, it is testimony we can trust; testimony to the Truth that is to be found in Jesus the risen one, the one who promises resurrection and eternal life to his followers now.

Since the Geering debate of the early '60's, a debate turning on the issues Bauckham is addressing, faith for many in New Zealand, not least those left within an ever decreasing and embattled church, has been a fragile commodity; or at least a faith watered down until it is largely impotent and irrelevant.<sup>9</sup> It needn't be. If you struggle to believe you needn't. The

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<sup>6</sup> John 20:28.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 1:1.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 24:41.

<sup>9</sup> The Geering controversy was in itself neither here nor there but was important in so far as it encapsulated in a specific place and time larger and complex social and cultural forces that had been building for the previous 100 years.

words of the Gospel invite you to embrace not a “post-critical naiveté”<sup>10</sup> in which you close your eyes and believe everything or anything about Jesus.

Rather, the eyewitness testimony of the Gospel invites us into simple trust. Trust that the testimony about Jesus is true – and so life changing.

More on this next week...

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<sup>10</sup> See Marcus Borg, *Spirituality and Contemporary Culture*: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1639>

Question:

Do you believe that when we read the Gospels we are close to the words and deeds of Jesus? Why?