The Role of the Bible for Christians and Churches

Facing the Practical Questions

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In this paper I will make some comments about what the Bible is, before discussing what it means to sense distance and sense proximity in relation to it – with respect for truth and integrity – before turning to some comments about issues of its role today.

The Bible – what it is

Within a Uniting Church context it helpful to begin with the careful statements of the Basis of Union, where some important markers are set. There we read:

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated. When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, its message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses.

The Word of God on whom salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church. The Uniting Church lays upon its members the serious duty of reading the Scriptures, commits its ministers to preach from these and to administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as effective signs of the Gospel set forth in the Scriptures. Basis of Union Para 5 (my bolding)

Notice that it describes the scriptures as “testimony”, not as the Word of God, and goes on to write of the latter as personal (“on whom”), reflecting the identification of Jesus as the Word in the fourth gospel. It is also important to recognise the emphasis on appropriation of scripture not privately, but within a corporate context. This reappears with more precision in the following statement:

The Uniting Church acknowledges that God has never left the Church without faithful and scholarly interpreters of Scripture, or without those who have reflected deeply upon, and acted trustingly in obedience to, God’s living Word.

In particular the Uniting Church enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries, and gives thanks for the knowledge of God’s ways with humanity which are open to an informed faith. Basis of Union Para 11

Scriptures need scholarly interpretation, using the methods of “literary, historical and scientific enquiry” – again note the distinction from “God’s living Word”. There is a strong commitment here to “informed faith”. That is reinforced by acknowledgement of the wider context of critical thought:

The Uniting Church lives within a world-wide fellowship of Churches in which it will learn to sharpen its understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought.

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Within that fellowship the Uniting Church also stands in relation to contemporary societies in ways which will help it to understand its own nature and mission. The Uniting Church thanks God for the continuing witness and service of evangelist, of scholar, of prophet and of martyr. It prays that it may be ready when occasion demands to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds. *Basis of Union Para 11*

Thus the Basis of Union commits the church to open historical enquiry and avoids the fundamentalisms which treat scripture as the infallible word or words of God.

What then is the Bible? In overview the Bible consists firstly of a collection of Jewish writings (ca 8th – 2nd century BCE), traditionally designated, the Old Testament. It incorporates laws for cult and society, “stories” of national origin, universal myths of origin, collections of religious/political preaching (prophets), collections of common wisdom, and liturgical songs. This Jewish cultural heritage was retained and newly appropriated by the Christian movement which grew out of Judaism and continued to define its identity in relation to this heritage.

The New Testament, secondly, is a collection of writings of the emerging Christian movement (ca mid 1st to early 2nd century CE), incorporating letters of Paul addressing conflicts in the 40s and 50s CE, supplemented by later writings composed in his name; and four accounts of Jesus’ ministry (and one of the early church: Acts), Matthew and Luke being expansions and revisions of Mark and Q, John, a devotional drama composed to promote Jesus, effectively as God, though all employ older tradition to make promotional claims beyond those made by Jesus. In orientation they are typical products of self-promoting religious movements, seeking to garner authority and to maintain control, both in order to spread the movement and protect it.

**Sensing Distance**

These writings – and I focus mostly on the New Testament – belong to an alien world. They contain astounding claims to miraculous achievement: stilling storms, walking on water, multiplying food. We would love to be able to do these things, not least in desperate situations, but nobody seriously entertains the possibility. To contemplate telling such stories in the context of starving people or the terror of tsunamis is worse than an embarrassment and is to consign ourselves to callous irrelevance. Faith healings happen, but surely not on the scale reported and with more critical explanation, and exorcisms, apparently so central to Jesus’ reputation in some layers of the tradition, make little sense to the contemporary mind. We might mount defences and dispute the dogmatisms of disbelief, but in reality people, including those who desperately profess belief, do not go around assuming such possibilities. In the world of the first Christians miracles served propaganda, whether for emperors or for religious leaders, and certainly they played a major role in promoting the Christian cause. Mark’s notes that many were healed regularly becomes in his copiers a claim that all were healed. Exaggeration to enhance impact was alive and well. Anecdote after anecdote highlights Jesus as wonderworker and they show little or no interest in the actual people healed. The focus is mostly adulation and propaganda, not compassion.

Their was a world which traced it origins to Adam and Eve, the creation of woman to a man’s rib, and believed much else which we now recognise as common near eastern mythology – despite occasional atomistic use of its stories, for instance, to argue that God’s making male and female in his image must rule out any further options. Demons populated their world because, as another
myth explained, some angels had sex with beautiful women, producing giants, who killed each other off in mutual warfare, and from their bodies emerged spirits, like personalised viruses, to plague humanity. One coped by exorcisms. Equally foreign for us as readers two millennia later are first century notions of a tiered universe and a more or less flat earth, and the assumption that divine intervention would soon bring history to an end, a view endemic to the early Christian movement, which proved as time lapsed to be a misapprehension.

Their social world was also significantly different. Households were the cornerstone of the economy, networked into hierarchies of dependence on richer patrons. Work and welfare depended on households, where both men and women worked in agriculture and craft, and where the male head managed external affairs, his wife, internal matters. Men married at around 30, when they had gained sufficient resources – not insignificantly Jesus chose at that age to embark on celibate ministry instead. Women, daughters, were married off by their fathers as soon after puberty as possible to avoid the risk of their falling pregnant, so that marriage partnerships, vital for household and progeny, were unequal. Women, almost all of whom married, were thus junior to their partners, sometimes half their age, a situation of social and experiential inferiority, which informed and reinforced what we now rightly see as gender prejudice, but which made sense to them and made sense of their predominant preference for male leadership. Marriages were arranged within extended families; women passed from control of fathers to control of husbands. This did not stop the possibilities of love emerging, anymore than it does in societies which practice arranged marriages today, especially where the arrangers read nascent signals of attraction.

Because the household was the basis for support and survival, virtually the sole source of welfare, stability was paramount and marriage designed to ensure it. Without effective contraception this meant avoiding unwanted pregnancies and strict control of women, both prior to marriage and during it. Virginity could be seen as some guarantee that a wife would be chaste during marriage. To avoid the chaos which such risks threatened it made sense that where adultery had taken place, marriages must be terminated and (usually) the woman divorced. In Greek, Roman, and Jewish law adultery mandated divorce, because sex created a new union which severed previous ones, a notion which Jesus is said to have used to affirm the oneness it created and Paul used to warn that sex with another terminated also one’s relation to Christ. Even Jesus’ absolute prohibition of divorce probably assumes nevertheless that it remains mandated where adultery has taken place.

Such rules were tight and it took generations for notions of grace, forgiveness and reconciliation to enter the field, something we take for granted. Of course, the first believers as Jews of their day saw same-sex intercourse as the product of perverted passions, a view which anecdotes and perhaps their own experience of wild parties reinforced, where men indiscriminately slept with both women and men usually associated with excessive consumption of alcohol. The realisation that this is not the whole story has been for most a relatively recent discovery.

The sense of distance emerges at a more fundamental level when we are confronted with notions that God will one day cease loving and condemn people in judgement to an eternity of torment. Such notions which for long formed the framework of Christian thought and the basis for its self-promotion, offering a way of escaping God’s wrath, jar with the more generous images we choose to treasure. Such assumptions then see the cross as in some way required to persuade an angry God to desist, at least for the interim. Cursed for us that we may not be cursed, Christ can be read as
engaging voluntarily in an attempt to get God to love, as though love does not come naturally without some compensation or penalty. There are texts enough to warrant an image of Jesus as an exception in the life of God, not God’s default stance and so inevitably not the default stance of many God-followers since, who have brought not love but hate to the world. God’s chief interests in such models then match those of infant egoism: “I want everything to centre on me”.

Acclamations of deity using models of human greatness and power, such as kings and male heads of families, inevitably transfer their agendas to God, shape structures of obeisance, from praying to prostrating, and so perpetuate values which sit well with human pretensions, making God in our best images and then in reverse reinforcing them from resultant divine modelling. Biblical witness has it all and its texts of Jesus’ post-resurrection enthronement have the potential to reduce his life to a short term strategy of compassion and lowliness, on which he turns his back with a sigh of relief that it is now over and life can return to normal where glory and power matter most. It need not be read so, but when it is, we find ourselves a long way from home.

Making the messenger the message is a common human trait linked to a propensity to idolise, which can easily lead to forgetting what the message was in the first place. I often tell an apocryphal story which I made up some years ago about a woman who idolised Shane Warne, and looking into his eyes, declared that she had been an admirer for years and wished she could play golf like him! Some of the New Testament material seems more bent on winning adulation for Jesus than espousing what he stood for.

One can see stages in this development, for instance in Mark’s anecdotes about Jesus’ conflicts (2:1 – 3:6). At the earliest level one hears argumentative aphorisms which assert that the sick need a doctor not the well, that the sabbath was made for people not people for the sabbath, or that throw out the challenge: what is easier; to say take up your bed and walk or to declare forgiveness? They are then overlaid not with arguments, but with claims to Jesus’ personal authority as having authorisation to forgive sins, and to be lord of the sabbath. Thus Mark holds appeal to reason and appeal to authority together, but it is not far off to appeal only to authority and go down the dangerous road of mindless adherence. In theological terms it is the slippage which occurs when christology eclipses theology.

Self promotion frequently leads to stereotyping of opposition, a form of deceit in the interests of propaganda, and, as one might expect, the fierce ideological conflicts between Christian Jews and other Jews followed the same path, a road which, crossing into other terrain, morphs into antisemitism.

There is much in the Bible which makes us sense distance, not just culturally and historically, but also morally and theologically. We should not pretend otherwise. The sense of distance, allowed to be, causes the collapse of pious projections onto the Bible of infallibility and inerrancy. Yet, paradoxically distance creates can create clearer vision and a keener sense of proximity.

Sensing Proximity

The biblical witness, as a collection of diverse writings produced in many different contexts, confronts us not only with the strange but also with the familiar, or at least with issues which speak
directly to our own day. Such, for instances, are the utterances in the prophets which make social
justice paramount, asserting it as God’s priority above cultic practices, which have a lesser place.

The reworking of common cultural myths of origin placed emphasis on human responsibility, rather
than on fatalism or pleading victimization as a result of the plots and adventures of gods and giants.
Enveloped in complex assumptions which include behaviours of God and others which fall short of
humaneness, let alone divine grace, are values which challenge greed and exploitation, confront
piety without practice, and subvert images of an aloof and power hungry God.

Underlying the conflicts of Jesus were competing understandings of God. Is God’s priority order at all
costs or do people matter more? Were people made for the sabbath or the sabbath for people?
Jesus employed the traditional images of God, father and king, but belonged to those Jews who read
them against the grain of obsession with power. Instead, Jesus appeals to common human
experience of parental compassion for wayward children, in effect to argue: why can’t you think of
God like that?

His notion of the kingdom of God, God’s rule, is characterised by healing, restoration, inclusivity, and
generosity, which subverts and confronts aggrandisement theology and the behaviour it generates.
Obedience by meticulous observance of divine laws becomes engagement in a relationship where
laws and tradition are embraced to serve love.

While a Matthew argues this as a “both-and”, reflecting what was probably Jesus’ own position, a
Paul pushes the implications to new conclusions, provoked by conflicts over insistence on obedience
to laws which he believed disadvantaged and discriminated against non-Jews. He argues for an
ethics of love generated by openness to being loved, a transformative process which makes sense of
what best produces change and compassionate community. In traditional terms: justification by
grace producing the fruit of righteous living.

Across the New Testament we see indication of the need to challenge the propagandistic approach
to spirituality and the focus on the sensational. Thus Paul relativises claims to super knowledge and
super miracles with the assertion that without love they mean nothing (1 Corinthians 13). Matthew
has Jesus declare that not those calling him “Lord, Lord” would enter God’s kingdom but those doing
God’s will as set out in the previous chapters, the Sermon on the Mount, adding that in the end
people will appeal in vain to their spiritual achievements of miracle, exorcism, and wondrous deeds
(7:21-23). The gospel of John depicts people following Jesus who “believed in his name”
terminology for conversion) having seen his miracles, and adds, somewhat playfully, that Jesus did
not “believe” in them, because he knew what was going on in people (2:23-25). Nicodemus then
steps up as an example and is told he needs to be born again (3:1-3). People, it reports, similarly
wanted to acclaim him their king because of his miracles and Jesus would have none of it (6:2, 14-
15).

Mark portrays the disciples as falling into the same trap as they acclaim Jesus the Messiah. First
Peter refuses to accept Jesus’ intimation that his road would lead to suffering (8:27-33); then Jesus
finds the disciples arguing over which of them would be the greatest (9:30-37); and finally James and
John make a bid to have the honour of being enthroned on either side of their Messiah. Jesus
confronts their projections of grandeur with a model of greatness and personhood defined by love
and humility and the willingness to follow paths which make one vulnerable (10:32-45). In powerful
irony Mark then displays Jesus as indeed enthroned and crowned: on a cross with a crown of thorns. Conflicting value systems are here vying for attention and they have major implications for how we see ourselves, Jesus, but also God.

The highly imaginative gospel of John stands in a creative tradition which treats both Old Testament tradition and its tradition about Jesus symbolically to construct a narrative in which Jesus is presented as the embodiment of God’s communication, even more than of the sacred Law, indeed as the embodiment of God. His appeal is then not to complex beliefs but to embrace a relationship of love and acceptance from God and so find fulfilment of one’s deeper yearning. He is then the bread of life, the light, the life, the bringer of water and much else. His story, written up like a stage play with a larger than life Jesus and stereotyped antagonists, is a radically simplified depiction of divine invitation, its acceptance, its rejection, and its future. Love defines relationships in all directions, thus generating spirituality and community. The least historical of the gospels, it projects in some ways the most accessible spirituality and provides a model for mythologisation of tradition in order to serve a relational spirituality based on love.

The notion of God as loving and generous, confronting all that is not and inviting all to freedom and change, is a profound insight embedded in much of the material, even if sometimes set beside stones of a very different colour. It informs what was critical and central in the accounts of Jesus’ ministry and in most articulate form finds expression in the struggles of Paul. It thus not only assumes the connectedness of all reality through belief in one God, but dares to assert that in “God” there is love, positivity, hope, respect at the ground of being. That means connectedness at a profound level, but also engagement and responsibility at all levels for people and for our world, from being good news for the poor in face of human poverty and injustice to being good news for our world and its future. Beyond sheer optimism the biblical witness also confronts us with a cross, as a mirror in which to see the depravity of killing love and to see how far love will go.

**Truth and Integrity**

I have commented selectively on the experience of distance and proximity. Much more could be added. Piety, old and new, often seeks to avoid distance, not least because it is painful and sometimes lonely. So we might hear the claim that the problems are only with the God of the Old Testament, but as I have shown the New is not less alien. Or we might desperately appeal to randomness of subatomic particles to rescue the possibility of miracles, but then demonstrate by how we live that we do not really assume them. Or one might retreat into postmodernist rhetoric to declare that every reading is legitimate, but at what cost to integrity?

Modern pieties of a more radical kind will try to find their values in the Bible after all by reading them in: so it does say women are equal; it does affirm gays. The reality is: it does not. Why can’t we affirm such values as valid in their own right? Why do we need to read them back into ancient texts when they are not or rarely there? It is a neofundamentalism.

Or one hears: the miracles were only meant to be parables; the healings were not cures but like hospice support; the eschatological statements were only symbols; and Jesus, unlike nearly all around him and learned from him, was not a believer in such things. This is historically most unlikely. It is naïve to imagine that Jesus was not a person of his time, did not believe in demons, or in a tiered universe, or did not, like his mentor John and his closest disciples, believe time was limited.
It is true that gospel writers and tradents before them employed miracles symbolically, so that in their embellishments they must have been aware of the fictional character of their portraits. This is obviously so with Mark’s use of the feeding of the 5000 and 4000 to celebrate the inclusion of Jews and gentiles respectively, especially when he then has Jesus confront the disciples over the meaning of the symbolism of the 12 and 7 baskets of leftovers (8:14-21). It is so when Matthew uses a single episode of Mark twice or turns one blind man into two or the Gerasene demonic into two (Matt 9:27-31; 20:29-34; cf. Mark 10:46-52; Matt 8:28-34; cf. Mark 5:1-20). But behind such creative shifts is nevertheless the assumption of an actual miracle, as in the many summary reports of such deeds. Why would one want to explain away what they believed? Why not simply disbelieve it? Neo-piety rides again.

More commonly, distance is simply avoided as people, especially preachers, feel they must focus only on the positive. In that way no one will be upset, but also no one will be adequately educated. There are, however, ways of telling the whole story without creating chaos. Education always has to be pastoral. One of the simplest ways is to have people read an episode in Mark, Matthew, and Luke in parallel – easy to do using powerpoint – preferably one which cannot be explained away as having happened three times. Jesus’ baptism or last meal serves the purpose well. Even without commentary people will begin drawing conclusions, but with help will be able to see differences and why they are there, especially with some background information about Mark as the source of the other two. To pretend only proximity and so leave people assuming you see only proximity is a disservice and not really telling the whole truth. It is, in effect, deceit.

Facing the distance is a bit like going through adolescence and finding a new relationship with your parents. Some people never make it and either pretend about their parents or resent them for life. Making it through theological adolescence can be just as turbulent for some and some never make it. Some live in denial. Some live in resentment. Patient facing and acceptance of reality, including what one can and cannot know, helps one make the transition and work through the grief that many experience. We need to help people get through theological adolescence and avoid indulging it and perpetuating the pseudo-fellowship which such indulgence brings.

Many people still consider it useful for their own adult health and spiritual maturity to be engaged in social contexts structured to include interaction with the Bible and its diverse range of contents. In doing so they are making a particular choice, often governed also by other things such as family/friends and aesthetic preference, to be part of what is one cultural expression of human spirituality. People who might espouse the ethical values anyway make this choice, which in effect includes a choice about interaction with this collection of Jewish and early Christian literature, privileging it as a useful and inspiring source for their own nourishment. From outside it might seem a rather odd choice, but it is one which many make, this writer included (thus from here on “we”). It is not the only option. Another is to find one’s life and inspiration elsewhere.

We participate (and may even exercise leadership) in communities whose identity is inescapably bound up with the use of the Bible. As we do so, we need to take responsibility for being realistic about these writings: as potentially life-giving and potentially destructive. Respect and critical engagement is due to all human communication, as is truth and integrity. In human relations that means respecting/listening to the other, in their context, culture and language, not reading in one’s expectations, not engaging in selective hearing, not idealising, not putting the other on a pedestal,
but allowing the other to be, and so, hallowing the other. In relation to biblical writers it is the same: listening to them in their context, culture and language; and letting them offend and inspire and be.

We belong to communities who choose to make the Bible a central feature of their version of spirituality – helping people connect to God in themselves, in others and in the world. The issue is how to do this without misusing it as infallible, or treating it as an authority to mandate ideas and values, which need to stand on their own feet. What should we be saying and doing (or not doing) with the Bible, in order not to compromise truth and integrity?

The Role of the Bible

We are perhaps most familiar with the use of the Bible in exposition through sermons, homilies, or reflections – often based on the useful discipline of following the Revised Common Lectionary – to help connect people to God, in themselves, in others, and in the world.

One option is to use the biblical text mainly as a platform for contemporary thematic reflection, without entering the world of the text. There is a place for this, but it has serious limitations, especially if it is the dominant mode, because then there is usually too little engagement with the text, itself, and often an assumption that using it lends some sort of extra credibility to what we want to say, when we ought to be making a case that holds up because it makes sense.

A second option is to bring people into the world of the text, usually to draw an analogy between tensions or issues discernible in the text and issues today. The process of entering the story implicit in the text can result in people sensing a connection with their own stories, whether or not the preacher conceptualises that possibility (as they might in being moved by a film or a novel). This is not about graphic storytelling, which few can do well, but about identifying what pulls and pushes in the text in a way that connects to the strains we ourselves feel or experience in our world, or to put differently, identifying its nodes in a way that the spark can jump across to ours. There is something happening in these texts. They have a story. They belong to a struggle. Engaged at the level of what they doing and not just what they are saying, they can engage us at the level of our story within our world. That may occur in many ways: “good news for the poor”, if explored, takes us to human need as much an issue in our day as in theirs; the cries of a blind beggar then find their echo in our own; stories of alienation, restoration, renewal, and hope speak the language of our experience; wonder and awe sing a common song across the ages; the cross still invites the reflection: were you there?

What has made the Bible life-giving is not just its ethical values or its concepts and ideas, but its embedding them in spirituality. Cognitive/rational engagement is only one kind of engagement people have with the Bible. In reality the most influential functioning occurs at other levels and these are important to take into account in examining how we manage the Bible’s role. This is true both in the communication medium we traditionally call preaching, and in much else that we do.

The setting of public use of the Bible within liturgical settings – music, architecture, the rhythms and poetry of ritual words and acts – means that its role is frequently at the non-cognitive level of the kiss rather than the proposal. Christian gatherings structured in this way are to a large degree a doing and engagement at that pre-rational level, rather than intellectual cognitive engagement. They engage in the mediation of meaning through the play of myth and ritual, especially where the non-rational has not been censored away. This is perhaps more starkly evident in the controlled
liturgical environment of the broadly catholic tradition, where one might hear the most progressive preaching from an Anglican, for instance, within a high church setting which is full of the sounds, signs, and incense of another world.

That symbolic world of myth and mystery is for many the attraction that makes engagement rewarding and enriching. Myths give us language – David and Goliath, crucifixion/resurrection. They may have been intended as metaphor like parables or as (tendentious) history, but are a reservoir of meaning-bearing stories and images with which to express meaning (as in many cultures). Something goes on at the level of non-rational engagement which is not easily defined and certainly not easily reduced to ideas and arguments. For those with a history in the Christian religious cultural tradition biblical images and hymns/songs can be powerful bearers of meaning in evoking memory and reactivating significant spiritual awarenesses – often independently of cognitive content and sometimes despite it. What is communicated in this way is often much more powerful than the direct communication made in the sermon. Indeed, it is not uncommon for the best insights of the preaching to be outflanked by the more subtle message of the liturgy, where one can learn, for instance, that what we apparently admire most in God (and so in life!) is glory and might, not love and compassion, because our prayers and songs say so.

Precisely because meaning in Christian communities is especially mediated by myth and ritual, we have a responsibility to take what one might call myth-management seriously. One of the challenges is to find a careful balance between deleting everything from which we rationally dissent and simply letting the tradition roll on unexamined. The music of a fine old hymn may do things for me because of its history with me, but only if I engage a willing suspension of disbelief. Our relived experiences evoked through years of repetition and allusion are powerful.

People leading worship need to see themselves as administering myth and so especially to examine where what they choreograph and perform is incongruent with core values and beliefs. If this is so in biblical readings, those preaching should say so openly. In my view it is better to embrace the catholic tradition generously, but with critical awareness, than either to abandon it or simply to let it flow unchecked and unreflected upon.

Myth minimisation, reduction to the rational, historical use of the Bible for reasoned discourse, might seem a sensible option. But this is not how religion works – it needs poetry, art, story, drama, movement, mythology, dance. Religious language usually does not say what it means. There is a place for rigorous academic discourse and the mediation of its findings and open questions. It needs to be sustained against the danger of amateurism and populist theology which lacks academic accountability. For some, because it is religion, anything goes. Serious academic scholarship has a crucial role to play in thinking about faith and unfaith issues. It is not, however, what generates the life that most people look for in religion and at its Protestant worst has only ideas to offer, no song, no beauty, no colour, but only meetings and grayscale monotony.

The opposite is myth maximisation, giving priority to cultural aesthetics and engagement, based on an ahistorical use of the Bible, to resource religious experience. Religious experience at all costs, sensate fulfilment, the measure of effectiveness, and sometimes a resistance towards critical thought as "entering one's head", which for the headless is unthinkable. But ideas, even when embedded in myth and ritual, and employed to serve religious experience, remain are powerful in themselves – powerfully constructive and powerfully destructive. They have a life of their own and...
know how to stay alive even in what might seem a hostile environment, especially a naively uncritical one. They usually win.

We need, therefore, to take myth management seriously. That means use of the Bible (and tradition) to sustain a discourse and dance in which people find engagement with God, themselves and their world, but managed with critical awareness of what the Bible is and what it does, and a sense of responsibility in its use.

There is room for education at all levels about the Bible. The situation should not exist where adult education means unlearning what I learned in Sunday School.

For appropriate use of the Bible we need informed and skilled leadership in understanding and communicating ideas, with a degree of exegetical and theological expertise and ability to draw on specialist resources. Ministry of the Word must not be reduced to marketing management. In turn we need specialists engaging in research about the Bible and its world.

We also need informed and skilled leadership in developing skills and maturity for leadership of corporate engagement – choreographers of myth and ritual, rational and non-rational. The iconoclasm that eschews romance and symbol reducing worship to wordiness is a self-indulgence that does not serve us well. In turn we need specialists engaging in development of effective liturgy.

We also need informed and skilled leadership in keeping congregations aware of what words and movements mean and don’t mean – in relation to the Bible (what you do with it and what you say about it in liturgy) and much else like the eucharist. It will simply not do to leave hermeneutics to uncommented versicles like “This is the word of the Lord”; “Your word, O Lord, is a lamp for our feet; a light for our path”; “Lord, may your word live in us and bear much fruit to your glory”. Else they’ll say much more than we intend.

The answer may not lie in deletion, but in explanation. There is a place for such liturgical formulations as there is for Bach and Handel, who produced some of the Bible’s most beautiful representations. But we need to ensure that that place gives them their appropriate role and that heart and head belong together.

In whatever form, then, the Bible must not be left unattended.