

REBIRTHING THE BIG IDEA. [David Marshall]



Five hundred years ago a Big Idea was shouldering its way to the front in the thinking of the gathering reform movement in Europe.

The Church of the Middle Ages had claimed to be the sole dispenser of salvation. To get in with God, the Church taught, people must first make themselves good in the ways the Church prescribed.

But how qualified was the Church to dispense salvation? the great Renaissance scholars asked. There was something rotten in the state of Christendom.

The core of truth was not found in the teachings of churchmen. It was found in something older than the institutionalised church: the Bible. In the previous fifty years lay literacy had soared and the new technology of reusable type had made the Bible far more widely available than previously. Renaissance scholars were not just examining the ancient manuscripts of poets and philosophers, but of the Old and New Testaments. As they did so the faults of Jerome's Latin Vulgate began to show up.

Erasmus of Rotterdam worked on a more accurate version of the Bible in its original languages. What made the Big Idea possible, however, was the enthusiasm of scholars like William Tyndale and Martin Luther for making Erasmus's Textus Receptus the basis of easy-to-read Bibles printed in the languages people were accustomed to read.

The Church was angry. It was losing its monopoly on 'salvation'. It arranged huge bonfires of common language Bibles. It sought to burn, too, the scholars who had translated them and succeeded in the case of Englishman William Tyndale.

But God was behind the new movement – and its progress was onward. The Bible became more readily available than it had ever been. Far, far more important: the Bible came to be more widely read than it had ever been.

Those who see the resultant reform movement in purely temporal terms stress the role of princes and economic forces. Those of us who see the hand of God in it view what happened as the consequence of a freeing up of great scriptural truths locked up in Latin Bibles and monasteries for more than a thousand years.

Men like Martin Luther discovered that the Church of his day had lost sight of some fundamental themes of Christ's Gospel. Huldrych Zwingli wanted a Christian Renaissance: 'a Christianity that would be born all over again, restored to the simplicity and vitality of the apostolic age'.¹

The root of the Big Idea was the democratisation of faith. The true Church was a 'community' of believers, not a divinely-ordained, many-layered hierarchy with all the powers and authority vested exclusively in clergy. 'All believers, men and women, by virtue of their baptism, are priests.'² Luther based his 'priesthood of all believers' on the New Testament concept of a corporate 'royal priesthood'.

Luther insisted, at first, that the right to read and interpret the Bible was the birthright of every Christian. The Church had no divinely ordained monopoly on biblical interpretation. Only when this idea seemed to have contributed to the Peasants' War did Luther concede a special role for scholars in interpreting the Bible.

What were the consequences of the increased availability of the Bible and the widespread practice of Bible study?

* The Bible came to be accepted as the only foundation for belief and practice.

* The local language (as opposed to Latin, the language of the Church) was accepted as the only acceptable biblical text, and vehicle for worship, preaching and theological discussion. Accessibility was the key. All should be enabled to participate. That was basic to the Big Idea.

* Salvation is a free, unmerited gift of God received by faith. Justification by Faith was the central, controlling doctrine of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. Salvation was exclusively by the grace of God, not the gift of the Church.

* There is no spiritual elite because, fundamentally, there is no distinction between clergy and laity.

The implications of the Big Idea shook the Church to its foundations. It is still doing so. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a direct consequence.

But, from a twenty-first-century perspective, is it possible that the Big Idea has run into trouble? Yes; and it has run into trouble before. It runs into trouble when the novelty of the available, open Word wears off. When folks lose their fascination and stop making time to be immersed in the Word.

A hell-for-leather lifestyle can choke the Word. Over-familiarity with antiquated language can obscure meaning as surely as the Latin Vulgate did. Surrender to more novel contemporary claims on our attention – mp3 players, iPlayer, Blu-Ray players, the www – can silence the voice of God in our ears.

As medieval Christians took what was handed out by the Church without troubling to check the Word, so can we. Or we can allow some other intermediary ‘authority’ from an independent or, for that matter, ‘dependent’ ministry – to package truth for us.

The consequence of these failings is the prevalence of a folk-Adventism that views the Bible as no more than a rule book, a guide to behaviour God finds pleasing. This misconception reduces the Christian life to a quest for salvation through obedience to a stern, law-giving God.

That is a million miles from God’s Big Idea: salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

For Christianity to be born anew among us in power, for the simplicity and vitality of the apostolic age to erupt afresh – we need to revisit our Bibles.

Speaking personally, there is nothing to compare with the sheer thrill and invigoration of reading one of the gospels at a sitting, of being one of a careful prayer group who look at Acts again – and, thus prepared, take Romans chapter by chapter (better still, a few verses at a time).

The biographies – Joseph, Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah – of the Old Testament address all life’s issues and situations. It’s all there in the prophets and the psalms.

I hereby incite you to discover again ‘the power of God unto salvation’ in the privacy of your own home.

It’s time for the Big Idea to be reborn among us.

References:

1Alister McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution* (SPCK, 2007), page 67. 2Ibid, page 52.