

# *Hat Pegs or Driving Seat?*

Or

## *How to Read the Bible*

My friend, Rick Peterson, came across something he had written in an old Bible some years ago. He sent it to me. Being struck by the quote, I posted it on my Face Book page. It brought an encouraging response. Rick was pleased because, as he said, it showed that others have the same conviction. Here is the extract:

There is a huge difference between me having something to say and using the Bible to say it, and the Bible having something to say, and using me to say it.

About 25 years ago, I heard a man start his sermon in the usual way by announcing his text. But he immediately told us – he *warned* us, would more apt – that he was not going to preach those words, but use them as a peg upon which to hang some thoughts; in other words, he was using Scripture as a hat peg for his ideas.

Hence my title: ‘Hat Pegs or Driving Seat?’ or ‘How to Read the Bible’.

What I mean is, how do we read or preach the Scriptures? Do we treat the Scriptures as a collection of texts, as hat pegs upon which to hang our – or other men’s – thoughts, ideas or systems? Or do we treat the Scriptures as the authoritative word of God which it is our duty and privilege to understand, expound, apply and submit to?

As Peterson said:

There is a huge difference between me having something to say and using the Bible to say it, and the Bible having something to say, and using me to say it.

C.H.Spurgeon captured the point in his usual pithy way:

There is an essential difference between man's word and God's word, and it is fatal to mistake the one for the other.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, I readily admit that we all come to Scripture with our pre-suppositions. I do. You do. When I open my Bible, I know that I instinctively reach for my glasses; that is, I adopt my pre-suppositions. But one pre-supposition is essential for us all: I must take what I am reading to be the word of God, not just ordinary words in an ordinary book, a collection of the ideas of men. I am reading God's word. I cannot prove my supposition, but it is fundamental to my reading and preaching of Scripture. I believe – note the word – I believe I am reading and preaching the word of God. What I am trying to do is receive, obey, present, proclaim and declare the word of God. I am not making Scripture fit my system, nor am I setting out my ideas, having hung them on convenient proof texts. In other words, when I come to Scripture, Scripture is in the driving seat – not my ideas, not the systems of men. I am not rejecting the idea of a theological system, but I am saying that Scripture – not theology – must rule the roost.

I do not always succeed in this, I confess. But I really do try.

Alas, it seems to me, when faced with something that contradicts their favoured theology, many preachers, writers and Bible readers do not even try. Let me give but one example of what I am talking about.

Some years ago, in my efforts to preach consecutively through books of the Bible, I found my Reformed theology on the law was seriously challenged by Hebrews, and then demolished by Galatians.<sup>2</sup> I have not kept this experience to myself. I am known as a new-covenant theologian. Many believers do not like this at all. And they say so. And they write against me and my doctrine.

---

<sup>1</sup> C.H.Spurgeon sermon 1979.

<sup>2</sup> See 'My Testimony'.

I make no complaint about this. Indeed, I welcome constructive dialogue. ‘As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another’ (Prov. 27:17).

But, sad to say, what I usually find is that those who engage with me on the law do not do so by starting with Scripture and arguing it out. Oh no! They begin, continue and end with their theology – usually the system devised by Thomas Aquinas, tweaked by John Calvin, and set in confessional concrete by the Westminster Puritans in the 1640s. Oh, my opponents quote plenty of Scripture, yes, but they do so very much in the spirit of the Westminster Confession; namely, make a claim, and then produce a sheaf of proof texts.

This is highly questionable, highly dangerous. What we must do is start with Scripture – not theology. We must start with Scripture – its passages, its paragraphs, its context. We must not hang everything on isolated verses. By such a method, you can ‘prove’ almost anything!

Moreover, if you study the Westminster Confession, you will soon discover that very often the last thing provided by the chosen proof texts is proof! Indeed, on not a few occasions the proof texts are actually irrelevant to the point being made.

But the main fault with this approach is that such readers, preachers and writers are treating the Bible as a collection of hat pegs and not, as it is, the mandatory, authoritative word of God. Throughout the entire journey, Scripture – not theology – must be in the driving seat. Scripture must call the shots – not any man-made system, however old and hallowed by tradition and highly-respected theologians!