

# AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES CATFORD

BY STEPHEN R. HOLMES



JAMES CATFORD

**JAMES IS THE NEW CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF BIBLE SOCIETY.**

Chairman of Renovaré UK, and Sojourn Publications, he is also on the board of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity and of Premier Radio. He has spent the last twelve years working in commercial publishing, first with Hodder Headline and most recently with HarperCollins. He is married to Sue, and they live and worship in Central London.

*What do you hope for with Bible Society?*

I would like to see the Bible entering the marketplace of our everyday lives. Up on a shelf somewhere it might be beyond contradiction, but it is also gathering dust. I'd like to see it consulted when people are looking for advice and guidance, listened to at least as much as people listen to the radio, and taken as seriously as people take sport or exercise. Then we will know that we are making an impact on society as a whole.

*What does the Bible mean to you?*

The Bible talks about a relationship with God that's deep, personal and abiding. We can see it from the early pages of the Genesis story through to the coming of Jesus, the birth of the Church and the great book of Revelation. Everything in the Bible tells the same story: everyone can find an abundant life with God.

*What are you passionate about in your life and ministry?*

The Bible invites us to enter a life full of righteousness, peace and joy. In fact, it is the very life of Christ that is being offered to us in the Bible. It is intended to be experienced right here, right now, and not just when we die. I'm passionate about discovering this life that the Bible describes, in all its implications for individual people, societies and nations.

*What do you think are the major opportunities and problems that face Christian mission in the UK today?*

Dallas Willard calls the issue of poor or non-existent discipleship the elephant in the Western Church. It's there in the middle of all we do. We walk around it, make allowances for it and try to live with it. But we rarely name it as the biggest obstacle in our missional task, and are even less likely to intentionally try to shift it.

The plain fact is that the Church in England and Wales is lacking in discipleship. We have much to learn from Christians in other parts of the world. Visit, for example, a rapidly growing church in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia and you will find that you can hardly take up the collection unless you have completed an intensive

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Bible class for several months. Of course, the point is not having done a class but growing in Christ, and that comes by being what the Americans call “intentional” about change.

Not that the problem is new. We have, of course, been here before. I’ve been reading the journals of John Wesley recently and in August 1763 he said this: “I was more convinced than ever that the preaching like an apostle, without the joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer. How much preaching has there been for these twenty years all over Pembrokeshire! But no regular societies, no discipline, no order or connection. And the consequence is that nine in ten of those once awakened are now faster asleep than ever.” You can see his point. With no discipleship there is no growth, either personally or as a Church.

Someone once said that the way we form our spirituality is the spirituality we get. And, while the evangelical tradition, from which I come, is the best at bringing people into the Kingdom of God, it can often be the weakest at building them up. This is both the opportunity and the problem facing the contemporary Church. When we live out in our lives and relationships the claim of our biblical faith that transformation is actually possible, society wants to listen to us. When we replace this gospel with a truncated version, then we are rightly rejected. And we too should reject that filleted so-called “gospel” ourselves.

*What trends in culture and society, both positive and negative, do you think are relevant to the mission of Bible Society?*

However we define postmodernity, we can hardly deny that it exists and that it has now taken over almost all of the media, education and the arts. Only in science does the old way of seeing things cling on, which is why so many people these days remain unconvinced by the scientific argument that there is no such thing as God or a life outside of ourselves. They know that there is more to life than what we have got here at the moment, even with all our prosperity and manic-busyness.

Postmodernity cuts both ways and there are clear deficiencies in any view of the world that is less than the full picture we see in the Bible.

We can welcome insistence that for something to be real it has to work. The question “does it work for me?” is not such a bad question for us, and could well be a

wonderful opportunity for Bible Society. Does the life that the Bible describes, and which forms the missional heart of Bible Society, actually work?

This could be positive or negative. If we respond well to postmodernity and ask basic questions like “how would Jesus live my life if he were me?” then we could be on the threshold of something very significant. If we decide to go in the other direction and duck behind the wall that too often divides the Church from the world, then there is little hope for us. If it’s real, then the life that the Bible describes will work at all levels of society. That’s what excites me about joining Bible Society.

*What images or biblical texts might sum up your own vision of Christian ministry and mission?*

Strangely, as I start here at Bible Society, the phrase that most often comes to mind is the one that Matthew records at the very start of Jesus’ own ministry: “repent for the kingdom of the heaven is near” (Mt. 4.17). John the Baptist and Jesus are both saying “think about your thinking; think about it in the light of the reality that the Kingdom of God is now open and available to you”. It is a simple invitation, running throughout the New Testament, to rearrange our lives in the light of this.

Transferring from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light is most likely to be a process, not an event. Many of us are able to remember a moment when we first believed in Christ, but that’s just one point on the journey, although a very important one. This process applies as much to individuals as it does to entire nations. What would help us is what someone, with tongue-in-cheek, calls “conversion therapy”. People go to see a shrink to help them to think about their life in a different way. When you learn to drive you are being taught to think of the roads in a different way to when you are a pedestrian. In fact, a record by DC Boulevard, which has been a huge hit in the UK music charts this year, has just one line repeated through it: “consider things from a different point of view”. That line would sit comfortably in a Good News or a Contemporary English Version of the Bible. In our postmodern world we are talking about similar things. Jesus’ call to repent is the same invitation – one that resonates in world – to consider things from a different point of view, God’s.

*If there was one gift you could give to the churches in Britain to resource their mission, what would it be?*

I include myself in this and would wish for us all to be able to see life the way Jesus saw it. It’s an ability to see

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► and taste the reality that the Bible describes as something that is available to us here and now – a life where we don’t need to manipulate people or have power over each other; a life where we don’t need to worry any more; or judge each other. Put simply, and to borrow from Dallas Willard again, I long to see the life of the Bible as ordinary life for me, the Church and society. I think that is what William Wilberforce was saying when he wanted to “make goodness fashionable”.

If we can get this, we will need to spend less time trying to push people over the line of conversion, hoping they will go onto become disciples of Christ. Rather, we will obey more fully the command to make disciples and worry less about mere intellectual assent to a set of beliefs which leave us largely unmoved and unchanged. Now we are talking about true revival.

*Why does the Bible matter to public and political life in Britain today?*

Deep down it is very simple. We believe that it is the best source of information or wisdom available to humankind concerning the most important issues of life. Actually, it is unique; whatever part of the Church we come from, this is what we should grasp. Public and private matters are always tightly intertwined with these “matters of life”. And that’s why the witness of Scripture concerning them needs to be clearly heard in our day.

I hope, you can see some of my vision for Bible Society it is one that relates equally to top level, critical thinking, as well as street-level campaigning. I want us to engage in both, with each part supporting the other.