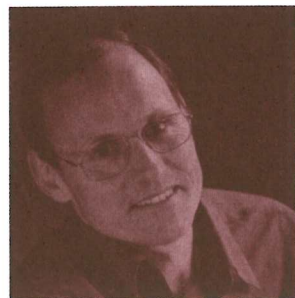


MAKING THE BIBLE HEARD

CHRIS SUNDERLAND



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BIBLE SOCIETY STEPS OUT IN FAITH WITH AN INNOVATIVE NEW CAMPAIGN IN NOTTINGHAM – CHRIS SUNDERLAND EXPLORES THE RATIONALE BEHIND IT. The first sign of anything happening was that huge posters appeared all over the city saying, “Should Lisa take revenge on Phil Mitchell? Text Yes or No.”

To fans of *EastEnders* it was obvious what it was about. The soap story had reached a crucial point. Lisa had nursed a desire for revenge against Phil ever since he had taken her daughter away. Confrontation was imminent and Lisa was even practising with a gun. A member of the public seeing the poster may have thought simply, “This is my chance to be a part of the action.” Yet there was more to this than met the eye. Two weeks later the posters were replaced with another image from *EastEnders* and the phrase, “The stories in soaps explore themes first dealt with in the Bible. If one grips the nation, why dismiss the other. To find out more visit www.getthestory.co.uk.”

What were Bible Society doing? The posters were a central part of a campaign in Nottingham through which Bible Society was aiming to challenge people within contemporary society to reassess the relevance of the Bible to their lives. The poster campaign was coupled with a set of events in prominent public venues. There was a telling of Mark’s Gospel in a theatre. There was a film festival at the cinema on the theme of spirituality and a drama. There were public discussions in a Council Chamber, a Café Scientifique, Waterstone’s bookshop and a pub. All took themes around life, story and spirituality, and sought to present the Bible and biblical thought into these new contexts.

For several years now, Bible Society have been developing a strategy for making the Bible heard in contemporary culture. Analysis of the situation in the UK has shown that it is not adequate simply to give people access to the Bible as a text, but that we also need to overcome cultural barriers to engagement with it. For people in today’s culture, meeting the Bible for the first time may be rather like meeting a slightly threatening stranger. The question then becomes, “How should we make the introduction?” We may hope that they will eventually go on to embrace the faith for themselves and that this text will become their own sacred scripture, but how should we introduce it to them? That is the question.

A similar question applies to the public life of society. Since the Enlightenment, the Christian Church has been progressively marginalised from the mainstream

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NOTES

1 Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001).

2 I am grateful to Colin Greene for this idea.

3 See for example the speech by John Yorke, former Executive Producer of *EastEnders* available on BBC's *EastEnders* website www.bbc.co.uk.

4 G. Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996).

► processes of power and decision making in this country. By and large, churches have responded by accepting the position and reading the Bible solely as a means to nurture the individual relationship with God. As a result, we have developed ways of thinking and language that no longer communicate powerfully to the culture of our day. Callum Brown argues that the loss of Christian reference within public discourse is a crucial component of what he calls, *The Death of Christian Britain*.¹ Colin Greene has likened our task to the change in discourse that has been achieved by disabled people in the last thirty years. They have progressed from being the “handicapped who are to be pitied” through to being almost fully integrated in society and treated with considerable respect. That is a substantial change of public discourse and it may mark the sort of transition that the Church needs to accomplish with regard to its faith.²

The campaign in Nottingham was principally a campaign to the culture not to the churches. It was to introduce the Bible, albeit at a very low level, to a society which no longer relates easily to it. A survey afterwards showed a high level of recognition among people toward the campaign. They knew it had happened. They knew it was about the Bible. And there was even some evidence of opinions shifting toward appreciating the relevance of the Bible to today's world, though the data on this point may not withstand rigorous scientific scrutiny.

The campaign invited people to see the as narrative and to explore its relationship to other types of story that are found in our culture. Fixing on *EastEnders* simply provided a point of connection that was genuinely familiar to many so as to introduce this other narrative, the Bible, which was both strange and unfamiliar. A large proportion of our population follow *EastEnders*. Fourteen million watched the return of Dirty Den. Bible Society simply said, “If one story grips the nation, why dismiss the other?” Some may be concerned that making this connection was no more than a gimmick or perhaps just another marketing exercise designed to manipulate people. It seems to me that both these charges can be dismissed if, lying behind the campaign, there is a clearly articulated theology and that the campaign is set within an ongoing process of mission that is consistent with the best principles of education. From a practical point of view, the scale of the task demands that ongoing mission responsibilities would largely have to be passed to the local churches in such a campaign. This in turn necessitates the whole venture

to be run in concert with local churches that grasp the vision and can take the process forward.

So what then of the theology? Step one is to make the link. What has *EastEnders* to do with the Bible? Simply, they are both substantially a form of narrative. Narratives come in a host of genres – from history to fairytales; from the serious narratives of the politician who takes us to war through to the comic tales of Chaucer. Our society is becoming increasingly aware that it works with narratives all the time. The stories that we embrace actually shape the way that we see the world. Dickens may have shaped the way people in the UK see the poor. Who can think workhouse without imagining Oliver? Yet all narratives have this in common: they are an attempt to tell of the experience of life, imagining or interpreting the actions of others, implying and judging why they do what they do. As such they are implicitly laden with deep level commitments of a moral, spiritual or other nature. And it is against these commitments that they should be judged by a discerning public. Let's examine this with regard to the Bible and *EastEnders*.

The common feature of all forms of story derives from the fact that throughout history and across different cultures human nature has hardly changed. People have had to come to terms with the same deep-level drives toward love, jealousy, revenge, compassion and the like. Their experiences cause them to reflect and they come up with stories to try to grasp elements of the truth about what life is and what is happening. For some, such reflection may be inspired by a relationship with God through faith. One important characteristic of the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures is the sheer realism of the stories. *EastEnders* may speak of Lisa taking revenge, but the Bible likewise has any number of stories that explore themes of revenge and forgiveness, and provide insight on the impact of faith upon the process. We may look to Esau as he waits for his deceiving brother to return, or turn to Joseph as he decides how to treat the brothers who gave him over as a slave. We may review the vicious reaction of Joab revenging his brother Asahel's death (2 Sam 3.22ff.) or the extraordinary forgiveness of Jesus as he cries “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23.34). There is no doubt that the Scriptures are, indeed, replete with stories carrying the same themes as any soap.

Yet, there we must take leave of the simplistic parallel. The Bible and *EastEnders* differ at their heart, that is, in

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their primary commitments. The primary commitment of *EastEnders* is to entertain. It must draw an audience and to do so it uses a number of devices. All entertaining storytellers do this. Shakespeare will set up a plot with an extraordinary prologue about two twins separated in a storm for example. *EastEnders* has at least three storytelling devices with which it grips the interest of its audience.

First, it develops a complex storyline around intensely emotional encounters. The viewer is taken on an emotional roller coaster ride as encounter follows encounter. There may be several separate moments of deep grief in one episode. The viewer experiences this vicariously, able to enjoy an emotional high without having to live the situation out in the real world. It is a great experience, one that many storytellers have worked with down the ages, but crafted with especial intensity through the televisual medium. In a world where relationships are often thin and superficial, what is more attractive than to be able to enter into this close community of people, to share their hopes and fears, and live without consequence?

Secondly, in *EastEnders* people are very inclined not to quite tell the other person all that is happening. A series of lies, half-truths and deceits provides a continuing feast of anxiety as the viewer wonders when this or that person will finally be found out. It is highly entertaining, but has a moral edge because the characters involved are not straightforward with others. This results in the portrayal of an extraordinary community, where the only two characters that clearly work from principle in their lives are given slightly pitiful roles. There is the overtly religious Dot and the diminutive Little Mo. Principles are less entertaining. This has serious results if characters become role models for the wider community. The resulting personal tales, where people get into enormously complicated webs of deception, might encourage viewers who see life in consequentialist terms, where all actions are judged by their outcomes rather than against any principles of right and wrong.

Finally, *EastEnders*, like all good tales, uses a small list of characters so as to enable good character development. This is aided and abetted by a tiny geographical focus, namely life around a market square. The result again has implications for realism. Walford appears to exist as in a bubble. Nothing of the goings on of the outer world impinges. There is little discussion of, or interaction with, any of our society's institutions.

Instead, the world of Walford is conceived with gangland bosses as the principle structuring authority.

With each of these devices, the storylines from *EastEnders* reflect their primary commitment to entertain. This does not mean that the stories are without value. Far from it, I think it is fair to say that the various encounters between people are exceptionally well told. They convey a certain authenticity. The characters are generally believable. This is how people in this sort of situation might behave. Some have even described it as morality play, helping those who watch to form their ideas on how people should behave in that sort of situation.³ There is evidence that *EastEnders* does indeed form part of the common language of our society. People do talk about it, even with strangers and as such it is certainly influential. Its danger may be to those who accept it uncritically, who are unaware of the devices being used to entertain and where the story simply and unconsciously shapes their view of the world.

In contrast, the Bible is unique, most particularly in the type as well as the content of narratives that it contains. Loughlin⁴ has reviewed with some care how biblical narratives are more than “facts” of history. He cites Benedict de Spinoza's claim that Scripture's prime objective is to move us to devotion and that it aims “to attract and lay hold of the imagination”. This is to appeal to people, even to grip them in the way that entertainment might do, but it is surely in response to a much greater overall purpose. I would suggest that the primary commitment of biblical narratives is not entertainment, but is about the *significance* of the stories. So, for example, the stories already quoted with regard to revenge and forgiveness are not there just because they illustrate something about human relationships, but because they are part of a bigger story that has to do with God's dealings with people and creation. This story goes on over centuries, is held together by key ideas – such as the sense of living in a relationship of trust with God – and charts how these beliefs made an impact on the development of social and political institutions, how they led to the coming of a Messiah, of an appeal to all to believe and much more. In other words the Bible makes a quite different truth claim to *EastEnders*. *EastEnders* might be judged by the vignettes that it portrays within its genre as entertainment. The Bible, on the other hand, has the whole world in view, speaks of a great creator God and reveals God's vision for society. There could really be no greater contrast. Yet both are story, and “if one grips the nation, why dismiss the other?”

► Finally, to return to the point of this analysis, a poster campaign can only begin a process of engagement with the Scriptures. At one level its assertions will be crude and inadequate. Yet, perhaps, it can be an introduction to this book of books. The events that were held in conjunction with the campaign were to begin the process of making connections and letting mission to the culture go forward. For example, near the end of the campaign we held an event in Waterstone's bookshop entitled, "So who tells our stories today?" The discussion covered much of the ground of this article. Perhaps that is a testament to the serious and profound missiological intent of this work. Yet, there were also weaknesses in the Nottingham campaign. In that situation, our relationship with the churches was probably not strong enough to ensure an ongoing process. We are actively working at this as we prepare the ground for our next project in Bristol 2005. ■