

# KEEPING THE MAIN THING THE MAIN THING

*Ian Buchanan*

**CEO @ LWPT (LEADERS OF WORSHIP AND PREACHERS TRUST), IAN BUCHANAN, REMINDS US THAT GOD'S MISSION INTO THE UK IS THE BIG ISSUE FOR ALL BIBLE TEACHERS**

My news sources arrive via books, newsletters, YouTubes, sermons, chats with mates at a Wetherspoon's prayer breakfast, social media and podcasts. Many of these voices have been raising a common concern about living in 21st century Britain.

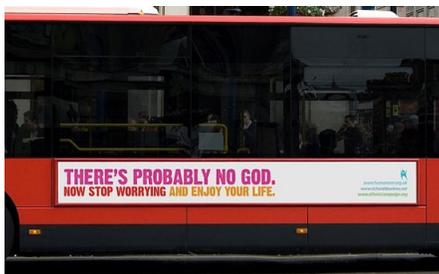
It's a dark picture of purposeless and lonely people living in our harsh secular age. The sepia colours fill out an image that looks like this<sup>1</sup>:

*After the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York the 'Four Horsemen of New Atheism' (Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett) ramped up their opposition towards all religions.*

1. *New Atheism's* rise and current decline has been analysed on Justin Brierley's podcast (launched October 2023), "The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God".

*Their message was a simple one: Atheism tells a better story than the fairy-tales proclaimed by hate-filled religious bigots. We're so much nicer than those scientifically ignorant worshippers of nothing.*

As the posters on buses in London told us in 2008-2009, 'There is probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life'. But the solution that they proposed slowly metastasised and corrupted our social imaginations by the twenty-teens.



Credit. The Atheist bus campaign partnership

Whilst people watched the Twin Towers collapse followed by wars, public protests, hate campaigns, a financial crash, terrorist attacks ... they also picked up a parallel message, a message that was not designed to sooth their growing fears.

As products of some primordial soup we are apparently just accidental two-legged descendants of pond-swimming-amoeba. Your life is utterly meaningless and purposeless. Then, just to ram home the shock of this joyless insight, Dawkins added, 'The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.'<sup>2</sup>

**BIBLE TEACHERS<sup>3</sup>, PLEASE KEEP THAT BLEAK CULTURAL BACKDROP IN MIND**

When we see life through this dark lens we can understand why Charles Taylor called the subsequent modern malaise the 'The Great Disembedding'<sup>4</sup>. A useful term that highlights a disturbing consequence of living in our secular age.

2. Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, Orion Publishing Co., 1995.

3. The Leaders of Worship and Preachers Trust (LWPT) uses this generic term to refer to the shapers of congregations who use the Bible as the shaping tool. LWPT wants to encourage worship leaders, preachers, Bible teachers, counsellors, house group leaders, evangelists and disciplers.

4. Charles Taylor, "A Secular Age", The Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA, 2007. p146.

It's shorthand for the sense of being alone, disconnected from society, trapped in online living without a compass, and no longer a 'given-ness to culture'. Purposelessness and meaninglessness now walk hand in hand. And your congregation lives with that backdrop every day.



But Bible teachers need a catchier way of painting that disorientating madness in its drab sepia colours. Well, how about imagining doing a jigsaw puzzle with the pieces turned upside down (the same repetitive blank underbelly of each piece staring back at you) or even worse, no picture on the lid at all? Just a pressing urge to complete the puzzle without knowing what the big picture is that the pieces are trying to reveal. Now you can feel what it's like to hear modernity's snide reminder: 'Tough luck, you still have to live without a guiding north star'.

But there is also a 20-something Glastonbury singer who has given us insight into the bitter reality of this worldview, Billie Eilish. She has lived her life without any overall sense of purpose and meaning. At the age of 11 she was addicted to pornography. By 14 she was into hard-core pornography.

This vile stream of sexual hedonism left her assuming that her casual hook-ups with boys will also come with some disturbing hard-core porn expectations. A life lived in the cold winds of a nihilistic post-Christian age. Disembedded from meaningful relationships, and no access to a tried and tested moral code, was Billie's reality<sup>5</sup>.

### NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE DAILY JOY OF LIVING WITH PURPOSE AND MEANING

Christian, your big driving story is true and full of goodness and beauty. It's full of colour. But does the Bible teacher keep that guiding story before you or are you lost in the details of Israel's journey from Egypt to Canaan? An important journey, no doubt; but did the sand storms of occasional battles, colourful characters and amazing miracles blind you to where it was all going? - Unfolding of course as that overarching grand story of God's unfolding mission into this world.

It's a story that highlights the contours of our journey from Genesis to Revelation<sup>6</sup>. Our compass that keeps us on track as we live with that God-given map for daily living.

5. "Billie Eilish says watching porn as a child 'destroyed my brain'", The Guardian, 15 December 2021

6. Christopher J.H. Wright, "The Mission of God", Intervarsity Press (IVP), 2006 and Christopher Watkin's stunning "Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture", Zondervan Pub., 2023 are good places to start. The Bible Society has produced a study guide called "The Bible Course: An eight-session course helping you explore the BIG story"

The journey is a well-known one, but often lost in the details of this morning's confusing reading about poor old Job. You'll know it's buried in your imagination as soon as I remind you. You can't read the Bible without realising that the author is orchestrating a huge mission story for his people to live out wherever they go; like a conductor who asks us to play his symphony his way.

There are so many clever options that the Bible teacher can use to remind us. Whether you choose a simple PowerPoint slide, a fridge magnet for congregations to take home, or one of my favourites, act it out 'on stage'. The contours of your reminders will include the following hills and valleys on the journey from Genesis to Revelation:



- When God created everything, all that he made was true, good and beautiful
- But our ancestors (and every generation since) rebelled. We want to invent our own definitions of the true, the good and the beautiful. Hatred of God and his expectations of us sits 'naturally' with people who define freedom as living free of anyone else's limits.
- But God was not willing to allow our rebellion to have the last word on his creation. So he designed a mission for himself. It's not your mission, it's not even the church's mission and it's certainly not the government's mission.
- It's a mission of restoration. Restoring his creation by restoring our relationship to him, to his creation and to each other. God is constantly using the hills and valleys of life to draw us all, inexorably, towards his goal of bringing about a sin-free new heaven and a new earth.
- But he is going to honour us mere rebellious mortals by inviting us into this unrelenting mission. That's the Good News. We can have our relationship with him restored, our damaged humanity slowly being returned to us - becoming more Christlike - or, free samples of Jesus (to everyone who wants to know what our God is like). We are his ambassadors. People who reflect him (albeit imperfectly) on the front line of his mission into this dark rebellious world. We are like mirrors reflecting his light.
- Once you have given the congregation that satellite view of the road ahead you can start filling in some crucial details. Start with Abraham; then Israel and their exile due to their rejection of his mission; then our Lord's birth, life, death and resurrection that sent the mission into

overdrive; the pouring out of his Spirit on all who choose to walk with him; the mission of the Church going global; that all too often overlooked Day of Judgement; before the grand finale of a new heaven and a new earth. A time when God's dwelling place will be with us, once again. And creation will be renewed.

### GETTING PRACTICAL

When I was studying for ministry, our homiletics (preaching) professor constantly used to remind us: 'Keep it practical. What are you giving them to take home and do this week?'. With that mantra still ringing in my ears, allow me to suggest two possibilities:

#### 1. When preparing your proclamation of life-changing truth:

- Ask, 'Where is this text in the unfolding history of God's mission?' Placing the passage in the big story starts to make sense of why they did it then but we don't do it now - why their actions are still defining our actions today.
- Choose people's personal stories to remind us that many other UK churches are finding that they are being transformed and shaping their local sub-cultures.
- Show them how their daily lives can be lived on the frontline of his mission with simple acts of kindness, generosity, standing firm, speaking up or simply serving.

#### 2. Remind them to keep the main thing the main thing

*If any church defines God's mission as evangelism and then bolts-on living morally upright lives, then they've missed the big picture. We have been invited to repent and turn around to see a magnificent calling to be his ambassadors. In Old Testament language: released from slavery in order to live as his royal priesthood, as the light of God before all nations.<sup>7</sup>*

7. Jay Sklar, "Leviticus", Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, Intervarsity Press (IVP), 2013. Sklar highlights God's call for practical holiness. Holiness that allows God to reflect himself through the mirror of his people. His chosen-for-mission people.

*As Christopher Wright likes to say, 'It is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world, as that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission - God's mission.'<sup>8</sup>*

### KEEPING THE MAIN THING THE MAIN THING<sup>9</sup>

One of my news sources (a podcast) dropped me into an interview with a well-known agnostic journalist. He had been asked to write an article on the state of Christianity on our islands.

So he decided to find out which denomination is shrinking the fastest and which one is growing the fastest. He would then visit one church from each denomination. Based on those visits he wrote an article using his experiences.



Photo credit: halepringle.com

His first visit was to the fastest shrinking one. The music was turgid, the people few, the lone teenager invisible, but the sermon was the issue that surprised him. It was a ten-minute homily on why we should respect each other's pronouns. Next he visited his local branch of the fastest growing denomination in the UK. He said that the atmosphere was entirely different. It was full of people buzzing with passion and purpose. They welcomed him. They helped him to understand their goals for daily living.

He watched them caring for each other by meeting each other's needs. The Bible-based sermon was about God's mission

8. "The Mission of God", p14

9. Inspired by Sklar's insight into why the end of the Book of Leviticus lays out God's clear warnings to Israel lest they make the mistake of shirking their main responsibility of "blessing the nations". "Leviticus", pp324-325.

delivered in such a way that it allowed the congregation to see practical things that they could do this week.

His world view didn't change but he finished off by telling us that he could easily see why those two denominations were travelling in opposite directions.

*Ian Buchanan joined LWPT from Wycliffe Bible Translators where he was able to see the profound effect that the Bible has when it enters into new language groups around the world. He longs to see our own nation experience, once again, what our ancestors knew only too well - God's Word is able to change people, nations and, ultimately, turn the world upside down.*

*LWPT wants to see that remarkable change in the UK by allowing the shapers of God's people to [1] become better communicators of the Bible, [2] obtain better Bible-based resources, [3] obtain tuition grants for further Bible-based studies.*



*PS: If you are a Methodist or a Wesleyan, LWPT has a restricted fund made up of gifts from individuals, churches and trusts. That fund can only help Methodists and Wesleyan students. Emerging Bible teachers who want to work out their ministry in UK churches. Go to: <https://lwpt.org.uk/vocational-grants>*