

CHAPTER 1: COMMON SENSE

“Come now, let us reason together.”
(Isaiah 1:18)

What do I mean when I say that our common sense is different now than it was in (for instance) first century Palestine or the fourth century Roman Empire? How is our common sense different now than in the days when the Bible was written and our doctrine was formulated?

For illustration, consider the example of a thunderstorm. A thunderstorm is a common enough occurrence. But suppose you wanted to know why a particularly severe and destructive storm had hit your locality—what would you do? Would you draw straws among your family and neighbors to see who was to blame? Would you kill a goat and examine its innards, or consult an oracle to see what the mayor had done wrong, or pray about it and await divine inspiration?

Of course not. You would want meteorological data. You would want to answer your question with reference to such things as high pressure and low pressure systems, cold fronts, prevailing winds, humidity, and barometric pressure. You would probably just consult the weather report in the newspaper or on TV, complete with satellite photographs of the entire nation. This is just common sense.

It does not matter that there are very few of us who actually understand what all this means, who understand how some air can be heavier than other air, or what ionization is, or why weather fronts cause wind to blow and rain to fall in one place instead of another. It is our common sense that the weather is explained by the kind of information provided by meteorology. Even if we don't trust the weatherman's forecast for tomorrow, we have no doubt that he or she can explain yesterday's weather, including why the original forecast turned out to be wrong.

We all know that this has not always been the case. In Biblical times it was the common sense of people that the weather was to be explained by reference to a very different set of facts. The severe storm in question, for instance, might be explained by referring to the anger of the God (or gods) who controlled it.

Thus in the Book of Jonah, when Jonah tries to sail to Tarshish to escape the call of the Lord and the ship runs into a violent storm, the crew assumes that the storm is caused by the anger of a god towards someone on board. So they draw straws (cast lots, actually) to determine who is responsible for bringing this upon them. This is assumed by the book's author to be a proper and sensible approach to the problem. The procedure works and Jonah is correctly discovered to be the culprit. He confesses and is thrown overboard at his own suggestion, causing the storm to abate, the ship to be saved, and the sailors to believe in Jonah's God.

This common sense of how to explain the weather is not confined to the Book of Jonah. From the great flood, to the drought inflicted on all Israel because of the sins of King Ahab (I Kings 17), to the great wind that killed Job's children, the weather was assumed to be explainable by reference to God (or gods, in other religions) and to divine pleasure or displeasure with people. Consequently it made sense to explain a severe storm by casting lots to determine who had angered the gods, or by trying to figure out what the king had done wrong, or by consulting a prophet or perhaps an oracle who would read the entrails of a sacrificed goat.

Obviously, our common sense of how to explain the weather has changed since then. In fact, how we understand the world has undergone a great transformation over the centuries. Our changed understanding of the weather is just one example of an underlying and thorough-going difference in our common sense of how to understand and explain the world around us. There is no way to escape the fact that our common sense approach to the universe, our common sense of how it works, is very different in some important ways from the common sense of the Biblical authors and the formulators of orthodox Christian doctrine.

In general, we treat our world as a "closed system" universe. Our shared assumption is that the events which happen in our world are caused by other events and circumstances in our world. The explanation of a thunderstorm is to be found in meteorology, not theology; by studying humidity and air pressure, not by casting lots or seeking oracles. The winning or losing of a battle is explained by the comparative strengths of the armies, by the tactics of commanders and the actions of troops, not by the favorable or antagonistic intervention of God. The prosperity of a country is explained in terms of natural resources, a healthy and productive population, and sound economic policies, not in terms of supernatural blessing on a deserving or chosen people.

All this is just common sense. But it is not the common sense of the Bible. The Bible assumes a "two storey" universe: that is, there are events which happen here in the natural world, which we can know and examine, and events which take place in the supernatural realm, usually beyond our direct knowledge. Furthermore, there is open communication

between these two realms, so that events in the natural world are sometimes explainable by causes in the supernatural realm.

To get a picture of how the relationship between the two storeys was conceived, imagine a solid rubber ball. Geographically, of course, God's activities were thought of as being centered in the heavens above a flat earth. But we will use this solid rubber ball as a metaphysical metaphor to illustrate how natural and supernatural were thought to interact.

The surface of this ball represents the finite natural world. The ball as a whole, including the surface, represents the realm of the activities of God. All that is below the surface represents the bulk of the supernatural that is out of our sight and not directly knowable. But there is no firm boundary that separates the natural surface from the supernatural whole of which it is a part. Actions on the surface can be expected to cause reactions within, which in turn have effects on the surface. Visible events on the surface can have invisible supernatural causes, and in fact we can reasonably infer such supernatural causes from what we see happening around us.

With this view of the universe, this common sense of how it works, it is entirely reasonable to explain a thunderstorm as the anger of God, or a victory in battle as caused by favorable divine intervention. And this creates a problem for us. How do we go about understanding the Bible when it assumes a common sense different from our own? How do we approach a Holy Scripture that not only explains events differently than we would, but that also has a very different understanding of what even counts for a reasonable explanation?

Before we try to address this problem, however, we ought in all fairness to respond to those who deny that this problem even exists. I am claiming that the Bible has a different common sense than we do, and that therefore there is a problem as to how to relate the teachings and stories of the Bible to us today. The assumption here is that we are not going to change our common sense, and this in effect sets up this modern common sense in judgment of the Biblical accounts.

There are several arguments that can be advanced against this position: first, that there is no need to adapt or interpret the Bible this way because this "modern common sense" is quite *uncommon*; second, that the current popularity of a belief or point of view is no guarantee of its truth, so the Bible ought not to be adapted to suit the understanding of a particular time; third, that the Bible *cannot* be adapted to this common sense, because this common sense excludes God; and fourth, that if our common sense disagrees with the Bible, then we must change our common sense after all, because the Bible is true.

One: This Modern Common Sense is Uncommon

I agree.

By "modern common sense" we mean the basic understanding that in

order to explain the events and circumstances of this natural world we must look to other events and circumstances within this natural world. We do not explain weather or prosperity with references to the supernatural.

In the world as a whole those who have this understanding are no doubt a minority. And those who have this understanding and are always consistent with it in all aspects of their lives are a very small portion indeed.

Does this mean we can ignore it? Does this mean we don't have to worry about interpreting the Bible to these people? No. Not only is it not in keeping with our faith to write off any group of people, but to ignore this common sense would be to write off the future. Those who now share this common sense are those who have best absorbed the modern scientific understanding. As this permeates through education systems to more and more people, an ever-increasing percentage will have this modern common sense. If Christianity remains tied to a common sense from the past and does not adapt and reach out to the common sense of the future it will become a mere historical relic.

Two: Popularity Is No Guarantee of Truth

I agree again. Wholeheartedly. The widespread popularity of any belief is no guarantee of its truth. We have been wrong before as an entire species, and no doubt we shall be again. The fact that more of us will have this modern common sense in the future does not necessarily mean it is right.

If this is so, then why must Scripture spanning a thousand years, and Christian doctrine that goes back almost two thousand years, accommodate themselves to the common sense of any particular time?

The great truths of the Christian faith are timeless, but the way in which those truths are expressed must fit the understanding of a particular time and place. Furthermore, we are convinced that our common sense of how the world works is right. Until we are convinced otherwise we must stick with this understanding. To do otherwise would be dishonest. And to deny our common sense would be to deny an important aspect of who we are.

I am a person of my age and my world-view. I accept myself and even celebrate myself as such, and cannot accept a system of beliefs which would force me to deny what I am. And if we follow this common sense in our every day actions and beliefs, as so many of us do, then it is intellectually dishonest to suspend this common sense when we happen to consider the realm of religion. We do not serve God by abandoning our intellectual integrity.

And the fact remains that specific events in this physical world are simply not explainable as caused by supernatural beings sticking in their thumbs from somewhere else and going "zap"!

Three: This Common Sense Leaves No Room for God

If our modern common sense of how the world works is that it is essentially a closed causal system, with finite physical events to be explained by finite physical causes, is there then any room left for God? Or have we fallen victim to the insidious encroachments of atheistic scientific thought and secular humanism?

If this latter is the case, if our modern common sense rules out God, then indeed it would appear to be an impossible task to try to interpret the Bible or the Christian faith to this understanding. But our common sense does *not* rule out God. I will explain later how modern science, and a common sense informed by it, provide a framework for understanding the presence of God. First, however, we must take a look at how we arrived at our present situation in which the advance of science can be interpreted (albeit wrongly) as the retreat of God.

Let us return to the common sense of the Bible. We represented this by picturing a solid rubber ball, the surface being the finite world, the whole being the realm of God, with no distinct dividing line between the natural and supernatural. For the last thousand years, however, Western Christian thought has been drawing a distinct and rigid dividing line and then backing God into a corner with it.

Different factors contributed to this. One was the classical idea of the perfection of God, which held that since God was perfect God must be unchangeable (and therefore unaffected in any real sense by the affairs of this world). This also implied a very definite separation between this perfect being and our messy, imperfect world.

Another factor was the time-honored custom of turning to God to explain all that we don't understand. When we understand the natural causes of something we explain it through science; when we don't understand its natural causes we explain it by attributing it to God. The underlying assumption here is that an event can be explained *either* by natural laws *or* by reference to God. The problem with this, of course, is that the more we understand about our natural world, the less room we leave for God.

So there developed a common sense that there was a natural world and a supernatural world, and that although the former depended upon the latter, there was a definite line between the two that was not normally crossed. We might represent this understanding by picturing two separate balls: one representing the finite, natural world, dependent for its existence on the other ball that represents the supernatural world, but spinning along quite nicely on its own according to its own set of natural laws. Between the two spheres is a gap that is bridged only by an "unnatural" act.

This, for some centuries now, has been our understanding of a miracle: it must be an event that cannot be explained by science, that can only be understood as a breaking in of the supernatural. Some Biblical

authors were able to see certain events as the result of understandable natural causes and *also* as miracles, such was the intermingling of supernatural with the natural. For some time, however, it has been generally assumed that an event must be *either* the result of worldly causes *or* a miracle, either natural or supernatural. A real honest-to-goodness miracle has to be an exception to the normal workings of nature, otherwise it's not a miracle. It has to be the result of God intervening and going "zap".

It is this understanding of how God acts—by miracles—which leaves no room for God when combined with our advancements in scientific knowledge and our modern common sense. It should not be surprising that a theology which grew out of one common sense should not fit with a different common sense. What we have here is (1) a sense (from years gone by) that physical events which we don't understand can be attributed to God's special action, and (2) a common sense that all physical events are understandable as the result of finite causes. It is the combination of these two that seems to leave no room for God.

By itself, then, this modern common sense does not rule out God. What is needed is a theology that explains God's presence and workings in a way that is consistent with this common sense, a theology that doesn't leave God in the unexplained fringes of our ignorance. And this is what I will try to develop later in this book, a theology that is in some ways more akin to the Biblical concept of the intermingling of natural and supernatural than is the recent tradition of two separate spheres. Instead of conceiving of God as acting through miracles (in the traditional sense) we will conceive of God as being present in the processes of our world, in the context within which we live.

Four: If Our Common Sense Disagrees With the Bible, Then We are Wrong

This last objection is a familiar one. "The Bible is right, so anyone who disagrees with it is wrong." Period. End of argument.

As difficult as it sometimes is to address this point of view, it is a widespread one and an important one, and certainly constitutes the majority view over the last two thousand years. The real question here is: what does it mean to approach the Bible faithfully? And can we do this in keeping with our common sense? But this key question deserves a separate chapter.