

The Good Book

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Acts 8:25-31

It was Abraham Lincoln who said of the Bible, “This is the best gift that God has given to humans...” And it was Patrick Henry who simply stated, “The Bible is worth all other books that have ever been printed.”

Although the Bible is certainly the most revered book in Western Civilization, to which Lincoln and Henry attest, it remains mysterious and difficult to understand. In recent days, what scholars call “Proof Texting,” or taking Scripture out of context, has become popular, although it is something that has been going on since the Bible was written. Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, used Paul’s words to justify the Administration’s Immigration policy...It is important to note that the same passage Sessions quoted was used by slaveowners to justify slavery. Some Meetings of Wilmington Yearly Meeting have used Scripture out of context to support their stance against marriage equality. Even *Morning Joe* on MSNBC has used portions of the *Sermon on the Mount* to counteract nearly everything that the Trump Administration is doing. I am reminded of the words of the theologian, Karl Barth, “Do not clout thy neighbor with thy Bible!”

Because of its mystery and difficulty, there has been a great deal of biblical illiteracy among those who claim to love it and follow its guiding principles. In a survey by the Gallup Organization, the following were discovered: 45 percent nationwide can name fewer than five of the Ten Commandments. A total of 46 percent can state all four of the Gospels correctly, and only 42 percent know that Jesus delivered the “Sermon on the Mount.” “Biblical illiteracy in America stems partly from ignorance of Scripture,” writes George Gallup, “but also from functional illiteracy among an estimate 27 million Americans, about one adult in five.” Compare this statistic to Colonial America where the literacy rate was nearly 100%.

Such biblical illiteracy was documented in the *National Review*, when the following Bible stories were submitted by real students: *In the first book of the Bible, Guinness’s, God got tired of creating the world, so He took the Sabbath off. Adam and Eve were created from an apple tree. Noah’s wife was called Joan of Ark. Lot’s wife was a pillar of salt by day, but a ball of fire by night. Samson slayed the Philistines with the axe of the apostles. Moses led the Hebrews to the Red Sea, where they made unleavened bread, which is bread without any ingredients. The Egyptians all drowned in the dessert. Afterwards, Moses went up on Mount Cyanide to get the 10 Amendments. The First Commandment was when Eve told Adam to eat the apple. The Fifth*

Commandment is to honor thy father and mother. The Seventh Commandment is thou shalt not admit adultery. Moses died before he ever reached Canada. Then Joshua led the Hebrews in the battle of Geritol.

David was a Hebrew King, skilled at playing the liar. He fought with the Finkelsteins, a race of people who lived in Biblical times. Solomon, one of David's sons, had 300 wives and 700 porcupines. Jesus enunciated the Golden Rule, which says to do one to others before they do one to you. The people followed the Lord and the 12 decibels. The epistles were the wives of the apostles. St. Paul cavorted to Christianity. He preached holy acrimony, which is another name for marriage. A Christian should have only one wife. This is called monotony.

In the passage from the Book of Acts which I read this morning, Philip confronts the Ethiopian who is reading from the Book of Isaiah. Philip asks him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless some one guides me?" The point is that reading the Bible will lead to questions, and we all need guides and teachers, critical thinking and one another, when it comes to understanding what we are reading.

When I was Editor of *Quaker Life* Magazine, I solicited an article from a former colleague of mine at the Earlham School of Religion. Before his

retirement, John Miller was ESR's Professor of Theology. He would define his discipline of study as simply, "the intellectual love of God." In the article he wrote, he shared these words: "In each of the three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, we have a reported exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees which is extremely important for our faith. In Luke's Gospel an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 'What is written in the law?' he replied. 'How do you read it?'

"He answered, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.' 'You have answered correctly,' Jesus replied, 'Do this and live'" (Luke 10:25-27) John Miller concludes, "Many people over the years have asked me 'What is the most important thing in the Bible?' I would suggest that these words of Jesus are the most important."

The word that we translate from the Greek into English as "MIND" in this passage, was commonly used to designate the inward organ that perceives, apprehends, or gains insight into something. It is what we would call intelligence, or the intellect or the mind. Thus, we are called to love God *with, in and through* the intellect.

To love God with one's intellect or mind, leads to reflective examination of all that we read, including the Bible. Examination leads to questions, and questions, in the end, lead to spiritual growth. This does not mean that one's heart is not important when reading the Bible, it only means that *we need our minds to balance where our heart is taking us.*

It is important to note in this brief survey of the Bible, that the production of what we call the New Testament, or The Christian Testament was unintentional. It arose bit by bit as a conscious effort to meet human need. The first of these small writings were produced about the middle of the First Century, the earliest being letters written by the Apostle Paul to encourage the struggling little groups of Christians which emerged in the Greek world. And we only have a small handful of the letters Paul wrote. If Paul had been told that he was producing something permanent and universal, he would have been the most surprised man in the world.

The Gospels came about because of widespread demand, particularly among Greek Christians for a fuller understanding of what Jesus did and said. They were delayed in their writing...The first being Mark, written about 70 Common Era, because the early Christians anticipated the return of Jesus at any moment. For the first 300 years of the Christian movement, we were not a people of the Book, we were a people of many gospels and writings, with

different communities of faith using different gospels and writings to help guide and interpret their faith. It was not until after the Council of Nicaea in 325 that we began to have a closed Canon. And, I might add, a canon that the Quakers did not close, but kept open with their understanding of continuing revelation. As Robert Barclay writes: “The Scriptures are a declaration of the fountain, and not the fountain itself, therefore they are not to be esteemed the principal ground of all truth and knowledge.” Quakers have always put their faith, *not in the book, but in the one to whom the book points.*

Many of you may know the name of J.B. Phillips. Phillips was an Englishman of an earlier generation, but his interpretation of the Christian Testament still stands as a model on which all other interpretations are measured. In the Prologue to his work, J.B. Phillips writes, and with this I close: “As the years have passed...my conviction has grown that the New Testament is in a quite special sense inspired. It is not magical, nor is it faultless: human beings wrote it. But by something which I would not hesitate to describe as a miracle, there is a concentration upon that area of inner truth which is fundamental and ageless.”