

# BSF: Smuggling Bibles and trafficking in theology



## Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Emerging from an intense evangelical-pentecostal environment in teen years, a friend and I were invited by some adult men to a serious model of Bible discussion called Bible Study Fellowship (BSF-bsfinternational.org). We were sent home each week with pages of “homework” – some unknown person’s commentary on selected biblical passages and very selective questions to answer. Men and women met separately (for some “biblical” reason, I assume) and a facilitator led the discussion on the week’s lesson. I remember nothing from those lessons, probably since I had entered a Christian college about that time where professors provided deeper investigations of biblical texts in the context of history. I learned there were many different ways of approaching this ancient literature. I never returned to BSF.

Upon reflection, I understood that BSF presented a very sectarian kind of biblical interpretation that could be characterized as a rather orthodox Calvinistic form of Christianity. The world is lost in sin, separate from God, so we are the ones chosen to save the lost by giving them Bibles and telling them what it says and means. The world must hear the message of Jesus from a specific, restrictive viewpoint, and that happens when the Bible is distributed around the world, interpreted within the very narrow perspective of BSF.

The English founder of BSF, Audrey Wetherell Johnson, served as a Bible-smuggling missionary to China in the 1930s. Before addressing a group of women in

California, Johnson remarked: “I never worried what to wear when I was teaching pagans.” Finding plenty of “pagans” and eager believers in America, she attracted an audience of students with her views on scripture. “By 1980, Miss Johnson had been writing BSF lessons and leading a blossoming ministry for more than 25 years.” Her retirement led to the organization relocating to San Antonio, Texas. “Today, Bible Study Fellowship – through Men’s, Women’s, Student, Children’s and Newborn groups, BSF Online and BSF’s WordGo app – serves more than 400,000 class members on six continents in more than 120 nations.” An impressive expansion. With assets of \$64 million for 2021 and over \$22 million in expenses, including \$11 million in salaries and benefits, BSF has become a major ministry. Which raises another question: How is “studying” a book a “ministry”? When treating ancient scriptures as an evangelistic ministry, there is a clear motive to convert and convince.

Though not a church, BSF has a “Statement of Faith” that includes their own creed:

“We believe that the 66 books of Holy Scripture as originally given are in their entirety the Word of God verbally inspired and wholly without error in all that they declare and, therefore, are the supreme and final authority of faith and life.” This is serious, literalistic Fundamentalism.

As with most supernaturalistic belief systems, BSF asserts: “We believe that all believers are called to be in the world but separate from it.” This fits well with their vision:

“We believe in the imminent, visible and bodily return of Christ to this earth to set up His kingdom and to judge the world in righteousness.” Believers in the imminent “End Times” have come and gone for 2,000 years. In the credulity of youth, I believed the urgent

message BSF was preaching: Christ is Coming Soon! (in the 1970s). This is the historic pattern of the evangelistic message meant to draw in more believers, joyfully and fearfully assenting to the never-ending “He’s Coming” message.

In terms of evangelism – preaching what some call “good news” – BSF teaches the following:

“We believe that Christians are called to witness for Christ, to preach the gospel to all nations and to study the Bible personally through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit until each one is matured into the pre-ordained purpose of God for him.” Let’s be clear: to be “mature” in faith is to accept the conservative, fundamental, evangelical opinions of BSF. What we might find interesting is how this fits in with Jesus’ own message. Sure, take the “good message” to the world, but did Jesus teach his students to “study the Bible”? For that matter, did Paul teach early Christians to handle his letters as holy scripture? Doubtful on both counts. And even if Jesus told his followers to “study the Bible,” which Bible would he hold up? The only one he knew was his family’s scripture: the Hebrew Bible. And how do you seriously study a “sacred” book written by human hands? Who is qualified to teach it? What theological biases do they bring to the book and pass along to students? Are they trafficking in theology?

This is, in effect, the gospel according to BSF. Their mission is “to magnify God and mature His people.”

Taking a magnifying glass to these ministries can certainly be a process of maturing.

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