

This I know, for the Bible tells me so? (Part Two)



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

As I regularly point out, the Bible says nothing — not a word, not a whisper. Books don't speak. If we choose to read the Bible, or any book, we read, reflect and return it to the shelf; perhaps referring to it for comfort or guidance. One survey revealed that only 9% of Christians read the Bible every day. As one who used to read "my Bible" devotionally, I know how important it is, at least for those whose faith depends on that book. Yet, among those who open the Bible daily, each Sunday or even occasionally, an immediate problem arises:

What if I don't understand what I'm reading? The Church through the centuries has a ready-made response: Don't worry, we have "inspired" people to tell you what it means — theologians, preachers, Sunday School teachers; be assured, these "authorities" are "led by the Spirit" and know what the words mean.

Here's where the additional, more serious, problem emerges: If it's "The Word of God," then these professional interpreters "know" what God thinks, says and demands of...you, the believer. All you need to do is believe...them. When they tell you "what the Bible says," it must be just what God says to you, for your life. See any danger with that?

In Part One of this series, I quoted from widely influential theologian Karl Barth, who summarized his faith with

the old childhood Sunday School song: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." This personalistic summary of the Bible may have sustained Barth through his private life of faith, but he came to see a much more expansive theology was needed. He took a stand against the political authority of the Nazis, and took the risk of signing the Barmen Declaration opposing fascism. However, to my knowledge he didn't take a stand against the religious authority of the Church. Looking back on my readings of Barth and other German theologians we so admired in seminary, I conclude that religious authoritarianism is as much a threat as any political authoritarianism. Both powers assume to speak for God, that God is on their side, and demand allegiance.

Many people read the Bible, listening for the voice of God speaking to them.

As a young Evangelical and Pentecostal, I did that all the time. God spoke to me, or so I believed. But I didn't really know what I was reading because I didn't know who wrote the words and the language and cultural context in which they wrote. I didn't know the history, and I certainly didn't know there were other ancient writings, other scriptures from other traditions, some older than the book I revered.

As a child, I never questioned why I needed someone other than my parents to watch over me. As a teen, I was comforted by the feeling that a strong, loving man — like my father, but with long hair — kept his eye on me, cared about me. When a hip young Baptist youth pastor hugged me, telling me he loved me, I was confident what I read in the Bible af-

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firmed the warm feeling I got from older believers.

Growing older, learning more from other teachers, and from my own reading, it became clear that I had a decision to make: Accept what the “experts” told me, the “authorities” and theologians who seemed “closer to God,” or choose to accept that each of them didn’t really know, and couldn’t really tell me what the Bible was actually teaching; they especially couldn’t tell me what to do with those teachings. I had to take responsibility for my own choices, not only which books to read for wise guidance, but what to believe, if to believe at all.

When the Gospel writer quotes Jesus saying: “You must become like little children” to enter God’s home with him, was he inviting us all to sing “Jesus loves me, this I know”? Or was it to encourage a “childlike maturity” that invites the “becoming” aspect, the educational process of choosing responsibility for self-education? Here again, no doubt, the “Bible experts” will correct that interpretation. “No, it doesn’t mean that, it can’t mean that, it means to be converted and simply accept whatever Jesus says.” To me, that sounds simplistic and dangerously manipulative. Is the only way we truly know what Jesus said, and what he meant, determined by what preachers and pastors tell us? We don’t need to think hard about it, because the Church has us covered?

If we choose, we can read the Bible, or any book, for ourselves. Others might help us to understand some things; we can listen to their opinions. But we’re not in Sunday School any more.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Free-thinker” (www.chighland.com).