

Faith without the Bible, dead or alive?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

A common theme or thread I consistently return to is framed by a question: What would it be like if the world never had holy books, if no one had ever written literature that became “sacred scripture?” I think this is a profound question with profound implications. In our culture, there is one sacred reference above all others, an inspired library of knowledge. Of course, I refer to Google. Well, seriously, the Bible. And by the way, you can access just about any version of the Bible, in ancient and modern languages, on the internet (other world wisdom is clickable too). Any verse is just a click away. Some seem to treat God in the same way. A prayer, a click, an instant connection.

The Book of James tells us “faith without works is dead.” But is faith without scriptures also dead? If this is shocking, think about the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Did he need scriptures? (some say he was the “incarnate Word”). Did he carry a scroll around and read verses to the crowds?

It’s true he quoted now and then from the only holy book he knew, the Hebrew scriptures, but the most radical thing he said about them is that he didn’t come to throw them out, only to “fulfill them.” Is this the same as using an instruction manual to set up a new machine, to learn the basics, then putting the booklet back in the drawer? Doesn’t that pretty much “fulfill” the need for the manual? Is it still useful? If you need to troubleshoot, it’s there as a reference, but you don’t carry it with you, quoting from it, or — worse — read it instead of running the machine! That would be ridiculous, and a waste.

The Apostle Paul claimed all scripture was inspired by God, which he may have said so his letters would be considered on par with scripture (which seems rather audacious). Here it may be wise to keep in mind that many other sacred writings of the world, including the Qur’an (Islam) the Gita (Hinduism), the Granth Sahib (Sikh) and the Book of Mormon (LDS) are considered inspired. When books are believed to be written by the hand of the Almighty, there isn’t much room for discussion, or serious investigation.

So, back to the main question: could faith, specifically the Christian faith, survive without a Bible? No book, no

faith? How would the stories be passed down through generations? Word of mouth worked for a long time. Think of indigenous cultures who never needed books. I suspect there are some believers who would be lost without their own copy of the Bible; I know I was in my evangelical youth. As I like to point out, if it’s true that the Bible, including the story of Jesus, has a particular focus on compassion toward the most vulnerable, on justice for the oppressed, on devotion centered on active service for others — compassion, justice, service — how are these dependent on printed pages of ancient books? Could it be said the traditional focus on the Bible tends to draw attention away from the very message central to the entire book?

I hear the objections: “The purpose of the Bible is to bring people to the Lord — salvation — and to teach how to live a faithful life as a believer.” OK, right, that is one message from the text. But once a person steps back to view the whole story, the many stories that make up the “biblical narrative,” one sees certain patterns, themes, threads. And one of those major threads — perhaps the most critical thread that binds the whole thing together — is that scriptures aren’t the primary point at all. They are secondary at best. People can argue that

the Bible is living, but it doesn’t breathe or have blood in its veins, it doesn’t speak, has no head, hands or heart, doesn’t serve anyone.

Imagine, if you will, a world without sacred books. Maybe there would be more “sacred” people, human beings respected and honored for their humanity, worthy of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” as one “secular scripture” states it. Imagine if people chose to believe in compassion, justice, service and love, not theological or “spiritual” things. Could a person say: “I believe in service” but not serve others? Could someone speak of their belief in love without living a loving life? The sincerity, or shallowness, of their faith would be quite obvious. This would eliminate any appeal to “sacred sources,” to quoting the “word of God,” to distract from acting for the benefit of others. Let’s read faces, study stories, carry empathy, practice what we know is good and right. Leave the holy manuals on the shelf.

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 Freethinker” (www.chighland.com).