

How the Church Has Inadvertently Kept the Bible in Captivity

“The word is near to you, on your lips and in your heart.”—ROMANS 10:8

“Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them; that, by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou has given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, for ever and ever, Amen.”—THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

“I have myself for many years made it a practice to read through the Bible once every year. I have always endeavored to read it with the same spirit and temper of mind which I now recommend to you; that is, with the intention and desire that it contribute to my advancement in wisdom and virtue . . . My custom is, to read four or five chapters every morning, immediately after rising from my bed. It employs about an hour of my time, and seems to me the most suitable manner of beginning the day.”—PRESIDENT JOHN ADAMS IN A LETTER TO HIS SON



By 2010, the parish that I served had grown from roughly twenty-five to sixty-five ministries. When I first arrived, it seemed at times like nothing moved in the parish unless I pushed it. I was reminded of the story of a pastor in a small town who went down to the train station every night. Word spread through the town that he sat by the railway each night until almost midnight. Members of his church members were perplexed by his behavior. Finally, one of his church wardens approached him and said, “People in the parish are concerned about you, Tom. They want to know why you come down to the railroad and sit there so late every night.” He responded, “The reason I visit the railroad station every night is that when the 11:35 express rolls through town, it’s the only thing that moves around here that I don’t have to push.”

By 2011, our church was just the opposite. We had added as many as forty new ministries, and leading our church was like riding a wild bronco. It was all that I could do to hold the reins. I had learned how to delegate effectively, how to select great lay leaders, and how to surround myself with very gifted staff members, each of whom excelled at things at which I was not nearly as skilled. I had long ago

2 DOING THE BIBLE BETTER

learned to lead our church without knowing many of the details about each of our ministries. I served as an orchestra conductor striving to make the ministries produce a harmonic sound and keep all of us together and focused on what was most important.

By Christmas Day 2010, I was delighted, but exhausted. The evening before, we had hosted close to twelve hundred members and visitors for worship at four Christmas Eve services, along with one Christmas Day service. As she was leaving the church, a woman said to me, "I've just hosted twenty-five people at my home for dinner!" She looked happy, but tired. I thought to myself, we just hosted over a thousand people. I was thrilled we had done that, but I, too, was tired. Leading our church is like coaching a football team. By the end of December, I am usually worn down and ready for a rest. I also reach a point where I am spiritually exhausted. That particular Christmas Day, I remember feeling as though I had used up all of my spiritual reserves.

After our teenage girls and my wife and I had exchanged gifts and enjoyed a nice Christmas dinner, I sat down by the fire with my Welsh Pembroke Corgi, Winston, whom I call the son that we never had. I was reading through a stack of newsletters, and I read in a friend's newsletter that he was inviting his parish to read the Bible with him in a year. What a fabulous idea, I thought to myself.

A Novel Idea: Read The Entire Bible With My Church

The idea of inviting my church to read the entire Bible had never crossed my mind. Over the years I had started all sorts of classes and Bible studies, but we always read one book of the Bible at a time or studied some aspect of Christianity or Christian spirituality. When we studied the Bible, sometimes it felt like we were dissecting something that was dead rather than engaging something alive and transformative.

I studied to prepare for the ministry at the Yale Divinity School and its Episcopal counterpart the Berkeley Divinity School. It was heady stuff, and I loved it. I had great professors. Many were nationally or internationally known in their respective fields. They were so brilliant that I developed a great fear that I could never say anything in a sermon or in a class or in the churches that I would serve in the years to come that wouldn't be slightly, if not sometimes significantly, inaccurate. I feared having one of my professors point out corrections about details from church history or quotations from Scripture that I had used. Their knowledge was so vast. Their minds were warehouses of information. Yet, for all of my learning at their feet, it felt as though the Bible had become an ancient document of incredible complexity that we dusted off or like a cadaver picked apart, muscle by muscle, bone by bone.

Dissecting The Word of God: The Bible As Cadaver

The approach to studying the Bible that I was trained to follow and share with others makes me think of that great American painting by Thomas Eakins, who was one of Philadelphia's pre-eminent painters in the late nineteenth century. In 1875, Eakins produced *The Gross Clinic*, perhaps his greatest masterpiece. In his painting, Eakins captures renowned Philadelphia surgeon Dr. Samuel D. Gross presiding over an operation to remove part of a diseased bone from a patient's thigh. Gross lectures in an amphitheater crowded with students eager to learn from his vast reservoir of knowledge. Measuring ninety-six by seventy-eight inches, *The Gross Clinic* is one of the artist's largest works. Eakins was elated by the project and stated, "it is very far better than anything I have ever done." Public reaction to the painting, however, was less enthusiastic. The painting was finally purchased by a medical college for the unimpressive sum of two hundred dollars. Today the once maligned picture is celebrated as perhaps the greatest nineteenth-century medical history painting and one of the most important portraits in American art.

The body in Eakins's painting is stiff. It lies inert. Its skin is pale. Its lifeblood and energy appear drained. Its days of transforming the lives of others appear to be over. Still, it continues to be a fine teaching tool for students. At times, it feels as though the Church has transformed the life-transforming and awe-inspiring Word of God into a cadaver—a dead object—worthy of study by academics and students. This is not what the Bible was intended to be.

Thomas Cranmer Called For Reading The Entire Bible

As I sat by the fireside, I pondered my own relationship with the Bible. I had read the Daily Lectionary for over twenty years, but at times it had grown tiring. The lectionary had evolved over the centuries. Back in 1549, when Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, the first Archbishop of Canterbury selected by King Henry VIII, created the first Book of Common Prayer in English history, Cranmer arranged a reading plan that clergy and lay persons could use to engage the Bible each day. It called for considerable reading on a daily basis.

People who followed Cranmer's reading plan read through the entire New Testament three times each year and almost the entire Old Testament. Nothing was omitted: every violent or gruesome story, scenes depicting God acting badly, portraits of Jesus' disciples bungling along or simply not comprehending his message, redundant passages, unflattering portraits of kings and religious leaders, stories of debauchery and strange behavior, hard-to-decipher passages were read by lay persons and clergy alike. Nothing was deemed too difficult or too unsavory.

Over time, however, the lectionary has become something much different. Today, the Church's lectionary has become a sort of sanitized Bible, where most of

4 DOING THE BIBLE BETTER

the unpleasant stories that would not make for good bedtime reading have been removed. Many lessons that portray God as violent, unfair, cold, angry, or vengeful have been omitted. Baffling passages whose meaning cannot be easily determined have been expunged. Many things that have been deemed to be too unattractive to read aloud in front of children have been cut. The result is something akin to the Bible produced by Thomas Jefferson.

The Temptation To Create A Smaller Bible

The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth or what is more commonly known as the *Jefferson Bible* was a book constructed by our third president in the latter years of his life by literally cutting and pasting sections of the New Testament to create the Bible he thought was more reasonable. In many ways, Jefferson was ahead of his time. In the centuries that followed, scholars figuratively created their own Bibles, suggesting that various parts did not belong in the original text, were later additions, or could never have been said by Jesus or other figures of the Bible. Some, like Jefferson, omitted any miracles and boiled the Bible down to a series of aphorisms or stories that were insightful and believable, while omitting anything that seemed to defy logic, reason, and the laws of science.

Jefferson's Bible omits most mentions of the supernatural, all sections of the gospels that speak about the Resurrection and Jesus' miracles, as well as any passage that refers to Jesus being divine. In an 1803 letter to Joseph Priestley, an eighteenth century English theologian who was a philosopher, chemist, educator, and political theorist, Jefferson stated that he conceived the idea of writing his view of the "Christian System" in a conversation with Dr. Benjamin Rush, a prominent Philadelphia physician who became the Surgeon General in the Continental Army and was a writer, educator, humanitarian, and the founder of Dickinson College.

In his letter to Priestly, Jefferson proposed beginning with a review of the morals of the ancient philosophers, moving on to the "deism and ethics of the Jews," and concluding with the "principles of a pure deism" taught by Jesus, "omitting the question of his deity." Jefferson explained he did not have the time, and urged the task on Priestley as the person best equipped to handle it. Jefferson accomplished a more limited goal in 1804 when he wrote "The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth," a predecessor to *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. He described it in a letter in 1813 to his predecessor as President, John Adams:

In extracting the pure principles which he taught, we should have to strip off the artificial vestments in which they have been muffled by priests, who have travestied them into various forms, as instruments of riches and power to themselves . . . We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, select, even from them, the very words only of Jesus. . . . There will be found remaining the

most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man. I have performed this operation for my own use, by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book, and arranging the matter which is evidently his, and which is as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill. The result is an octavo of forty-six pages, of pure and unsophisticated doctrines.

Jefferson never referred to his work as a “bible.” Indeed, the full title of his 1804 version was *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth, being Extracted from the Account of His Life and Doctrines Given by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; Being an Abridgement of the New Testament for the Use of the Indians, Unembarrassed [uncomplicated] with Matters of Fact or Faith beyond the Level of their Comprehensions*. Literally using a razor, Jefferson cut and pasted verses from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in chronological order. He mingled the thoughts and accounts of each evangelist to create a single flowing narrative. Thus, he began with the second and third chapters of the Gospel of Luke and followed them with the first chapter of Mark and the third chapter of Matthew. Consistent with his naturalist outlook, most supernatural events were omitted.

Therefore *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* begins with an account of Jesus’ birth but it omits all references to angels, Jesus’ genealogy, prophecy, miracles, the virgin birth, the divinity of Jesus, and, of course, Jesus’ Resurrection.

Jefferson’s razor also removed all supernatural acts of Christ, any mention of receiving the Holy Spirit, any discussion of angels, Noah’s Ark, the Great Flood, times of tribulation, and the Second Coming of Jesus. All focus on Jesus’ Resurrection and any talk of a future kingdom, eternal life, Heaven and Hell, the Devil, and a Day of Judgment was omitted as well. Rejecting the Resurrection of Jesus, the work ends with the words: “Now, in the place where He was crucified, there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulcher, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus. And rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulcher, and departed.” These words correspond to the ending of John 19 in the Bible.

Despite the stated intent of the 1804 version being “for the Use of the Indians,” there is no record of this or the work which Jefferson composed after it being used for that purpose. Indeed, Jefferson did not make his biblical and ethics works public. Instead, he acknowledged the existence of his work to only to a few friends, saying that he read it before retiring at night, as he found this project intensely personal and private. Historians believe that Jefferson created the book for his own satisfaction, supporting the Christian faith as he saw it.

The Lectionary: A Somewhat Shallow Theological Pool

Just as Jefferson created the Bible he found edifying to his own life and acceptable to his own belief system, so the Church has come to use the Lectionary

as its Bible within the Bible to the point that some clergy and most mainline Christians have never read it in its entirety. Hence, many of us who studied in mainline church seminaries were raised to read only the Lectionary or selections from the Bible on a daily basis. For the first decade or more after being ordained, I was diligent about doing so. If I missed a day or two, I always caught up. Sometimes I would read three or four days of lessons in a row to catch up. After a decade, I gave myself a break and just read the readings for the day even if I had missed several days before. I never felt like I was going deeper or learning anything new. I finally hired a classicist to come to my office each day one summer, and we read the Bible together in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. It was an incredibly stimulating experience. For two hours we sat and studied the Bible in ancient languages, guessing at what various words meant, how they should be translated, and how they fit together in a sentence. Sometimes the Greek was unclear and the Latin was easier to follow. At other times it was just the opposite. Reading through Genesis in Hebrew was very challenging, but it got easier as we read further and I increased my knowledge of Hebrew vocabulary. Every time he left my office I felt as though my brain was on steroids.

As exciting as this practice was, however, it did nothing to change my preaching or my ministry. Members of my church did not indicate they found my sermons more inspiring or illuminating. My ministry did not become more energized. My wife and family never commented on any change in my behavior. I did not feel or appear to be more patient, gentle, kind, or forgiving. I did not exercise more generosity or self-control. It was a great intellectual experience, but it did not change me. Sitting by the fireside reading my friend's invitation to his entire parish to read the Bible with him in a year seemed novel and exciting. I ripped out the page and put it in a pile of things to take back to my office as a great idea to do someday with my church. It was too late, however, to implement it in my parish for 2011.

What did dawn on me was it would be a great way for me to get back into reading the Bible; if I missed a day, I would just pick up where I left off. I recognized how lax I had become in reading Scripture. I had been spending all of my energy researching and preparing sermons and occasionally writing about passages of Scripture for the sake of influencing others, but I was not feeding or challenging myself.

The Bible as Transformational Reading

I decided to take my friend's invitation personally and read the entire Bible. It would be the first time in more than twenty years. Instead of reading snippets of Scripture, skipping significant sections along the way, and occasionally jumping around, I would read each book in its entirety and in order until I had finished the entire Bible. I sat by the fireside and began with Genesis, a book I

have always loved. As I read through the ancient stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, I felt myself reconnecting with Scripture.

I realized that my education and training had turned the Bible into a complicated text of truths and half-truths, stories that had been edited and redacted, a long history of oral tradition that was eventually set down on papyrus, and then copied and recopied over the centuries by scribes who sometimes made significant errors. Occasionally, these errors changed the meaning of a story or a teaching. Like many mainline clergy, I received little or no training in seminary as to how to help church members and spiritually-inclined seekers read the Bible on their own. I had almost no training on how to lead Bible studies or how to equip ordinary people successfully to read through the entire Bible. I guess my professors thought that this was too basic to teach, or that we could figure this out on our own. Leading a Bible study and helping lay people prayerfully engage the Bible was something that we would learn by trial and error after graduating from seminary and being unleashed on a parish.

Holding the Bible Hostage

By the time I left seminary, I knew more about the theories of how the Old Testament was constructed than I knew about the most life-giving passages that would speak to someone seeking solace and spiritual sustenance. I was part of a long line of clergy who had managed unknowingly to take the Bible away from the people and make it “the Church’s book.” The Church had inadvertently begun to hold the Bible hostage from the very people it served. As I read, I realized that if I was going to help others enjoy and glean spiritual fruit from reading the Bible each day, then I had to read it on a regular basis for my own spiritual growth and renewal and not solely as a means for study and sermon preparation.

There are over six billion Bibles in circulation today. It has been translated into over two thousand languages. Eighty-eight percent of Americans own a Bible, on average 3.4 Bibles per household. Most of these Bibles are on shelves or in attics or basements gathering dust. According to Mark Forshaw, the Executive Director for Global Scripture Impact at the American Bible Society, 88 percent of Americans believe the Bible contains everything a person needs to know to live a meaningful life; 79 percent believe that God regularly speaks to us through the Bible; and 74 percent report that they use the Bible to guide them in major decisions. On the other hand, 32 percent report that the Bible is hard to understand, and 30 percent claim that the Bible teaches intolerance.

We live in a time when the Bible is being discovered online. Similar to the invention of the printing press, the technology is fostering a new Reformation. Yet,

8 DOING THE BIBLE BETTER

only one in five Americans reads the Bible four times or more a week. We know that reflection on Scripture is the number-one catalyst for spiritual growth. Regular engagement with the Bible is head and shoulders above all other spiritual instruments and practices. We do not need to print and sell more Bibles. What we need is to read the ones that we have. We need to find exciting and stimulating ways to engage God's Word so our lives can be transformed in ways that lead us to find greater meaning and to serve God more faithfully.