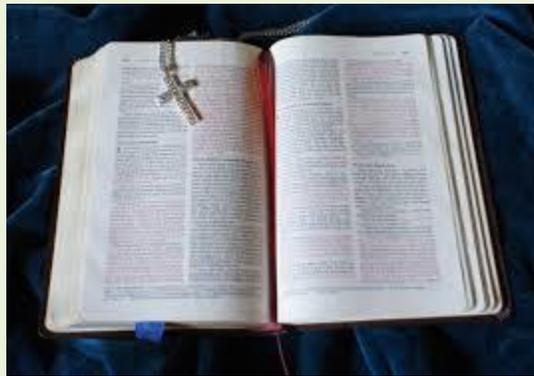


THE SPIRIT OF GOD AND BIBLIOLATRY

Charles Faupel



The Bible, which most Christians have been taught to revere as the Word of God, has become a major enemy to the **Word of God** Himself and to the fresh move of the Spirit of God. Most of Christendom, especially Western Christianity, has elevated the Bible to a position of idolatry in their individual and corporate lives. The Bible was never intended by God or its human scribes to be used in the idolatrous fashion that we are instructed by Christian leaders to use it today. I want to state at the outset, lest the reader think that I am some secular or liberal critic of the Bible, that I hold to a very high view of scripture. The high view that I hold, however, is that of what scripture is *intended* to be, not of the idol into which many Christians have made it.

I begin these observations with the words of Jesus himself, when speaking to the Pharisees. They were seeking to kill him because he had violated one of the sacred laws found in scripture and passed on through the generations. They knew the scriptures well, and honored and obeyed the scriptures perhaps more diligently than anyone of their day. And yet, Jesus had this to say:

You do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life. (John 5:38-40; NKJV).

Introducing his gospel, John states, “*In the beginning was the **Word**, and the **Word** was with God, and the **Word** was God*” (John 1:1, KJV). The **Word**, then, is Jesus Himself, whether manifest in human flesh during his time here on earth, before the beginning of *chronos* time when He was with the Father, or in our time, through His promised Holy Spirit. Yet, we have been wrongly taught to identify the “Word” as scripture, the written text. The written text is **not** the Word, and scripture itself never makes the case that it is the Word. While it certainly *contains* the words of God which convey the Spirit and Life of the Word, the written text itself is not the Word. Even when we say that scripture contains the Word, however, we must be very careful because we tend to make the written word (small w) the authoritative Word (capital W) when it is not.

The Problem with making the word the Word

This idolatry of the scriptures has had some tragic (if not humorous) results. I recall as a young child listening to a Pentecostal minister who became so impassioned in his preaching that he literally threw the Bible to the pulpit from which he was preaching. Going home from church that day, my parents waxed indignant about his lack of respect for the word of God. To them it was tantamount to blasphemy. The fact is, this pastor did not sling the Word of God at all, but merely the written text. Indeed, one might make the case that he was so full of the Word that he could not contain it, expressing this fullness in the slinging of the scripture to the pulpit!

The real tragedy of the idolatry of scripture, however, has been to warp and to thwart the true Word of God. How does this happen? First, scripture, as it is presented to us, comes in the form of translations from the original languages from which it is written. Indeed, many of the versions of scripture available to us are not even original translations but paraphrases of translations. This is, of course, inevitable, because not everyone (including myself) is a Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic scholar, nor should we be expected to be. Nevertheless, we must recognize that the text we are reading is **not** what the Biblical writers wrote. The English (or German or French, or Italian or Spanish or any other) language cannot possibly capture all of the nuance and meaning that is found in another language.

Moreover, because we do not usually have an understanding of the cultural, historical, and immediate context in which these ancient texts were written, the real meaning of the text is lost, unless the Holy Spirit gives revelation (which I discuss below).

Furthermore, the translations we receive—themselves highly limited in their capacity to convey the powerful realities that the Biblical writers were trying to communicate—have been encrusted with century upon century of tradition. These traditions, whether Catholic or any brand of Protestantism you wish, have then become the lens through which our minds interpret the written text before us. So, for example, when Jesus is teaching his disciples how to pray, he instructs them to go into their closet to pray—not in the public square or synagogue as the hypocrites do to be seen and heard. Ironically, the “Lord’s prayer” is used for public ritual, the very thing Jesus said not to do! Why do we do this? Because tradition dictates it. Moreover, when we examine this prayer, it is most revolutionary in nature—calling for an intrusion of the heavenly kingdom into this earthly domain. This results in overturning moneychanger’s tables (or tables with book and CD sales?) in the temple. This paradigm-shattering prayer model is totally missed in most of our churches today, replaced instead with a watered down ceremonial exercise that puts most people in the pews to sleep. Similarly, the many hard sayings of Jesus are almost never preached from the pulpits of western churches. The radical message of teachings such as hating our father and mother, even our own lives in order to be his disciple; the admonition to take up our cross daily, or not going back to bury our father before following him are not a part of our understanding of the gospel because these messages are outside the range of the traditions and lenses through which scripture has been taught to us.

The result of all of this is that we are left with an understanding of scripture that really isn’t scripture at all. The problem goes much deeper than this, however. It is not merely that we have a warped or even completely false understanding of what scripture is saying. The real issue, which is what is prompting this writing, is that the scriptures are *not* the Word, and that there is no *life* in these scriptures apart from the Holy Spirit’s teaching. Apart from this relationship with Him, scripture is dead letter; nothing more than a rule book, a moral code, or some

system of ethical principles from which to guide our lives. There is no power to transform a life within the written scripture alone. That only comes when we encounter the true Word, and it is the job of the Holy Spirit to reveal Him to us.

THE TRUE WORD: ENCOUNTERING JESUS THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT

We encounter the Word of God only when we encounter the risen Jesus. In *Him* we have life! Jesus told the Pharisees in the John 5 passage quoted earlier that the scriptures that they knew so well testified of *Him*. He made it very clear in that same passage that there is no life in the scriptures. *The life is in Him, the Living Word*. Jesus is not walking the earth on the shores of Galilee today. He is here, however, in the form of the Holy Spirit, which He promised His disciples before He went to the cross.

Jesus did not leave us with written scripture as the source of all knowledge and truth. I am grateful for the written accounts that we find in both the Old and New Testaments, but this is *not* the method that Jesus chose to lead us into knowledge and truth. Instead, he sent the Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you...(W)hen He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. (John 16:8, 13-14; NKJV).

You will notice that Jesus did *not* say that He would send the written scripture to guide us into all truth!

Jesus' beloved disciple, John, understood this, and understood the danger of looking to anything or anyone else for truth. Addressing a problem in the early church of false teachers (antichrist) coming in teaching all manner of false doctrine (probably based on some scriptural text), John writes in his first epistle,

But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him. (1 John 2:27; NKJV).

So the scripture itself gives testimony to the life-giving presence of Christ within each of us, which is the Word that guides us into all truth! It is certainly true that the scriptural text *contains* truth, as we have pointed out above. But the truth that is presented to us in scripture does not become the Word unless and until it is activated by the Holy Spirit—the very anointing of God—into our lives.

Moreover, the Word does not limit Himself to the pages of scripture. He speaks to us in fresh ways every day if we but have ears to hear. The inspired Word did not terminate with Revelation 22. There is much that God has to speak to us today that we will not be able to hear if we are locked into a mentality that equates the Word of God with scripture. When we diminish what God is speaking to us today through “every word that proceeds from the mouth of God,” and all His living epistles and manifold ways that God speaks, and render it as something less than the same divine inspiration that we attribute to the written scripture, we miss the powerful impact that the Word would want to impart unto His people today. There is certainly much that can be said regarding how we reconcile the Living Word that comes to us in fresh ways today with that conveyed in scripture. This is a matter of importance, and deserving of more attention, and one that I hope to take up in a separate writing at some point. What I believe important to underscore here, however, is that we must not diminish the fresh revelation of God as something inferior to the revelation that took place through the many centuries as recorded by the biblical writers. Scripture itself admonishes us not to do this, and for good reason—God is doing a new thing and bringing a fresh word in our time. Throughout much of Christendom, we have become stuck in an old paradigm that has effectively squelched His fresh Word from moving and speaking among His people today.

HOW DID WE GET TO THIS PLACE?

Ironically, we find ourselves in this place of stagnation largely in response to a fresh move of God that broke through encrusted traditions at another time in history! Scripture was raised to a place of prominence among Christians during the Reformation. The Catholic Church had encrusted the scriptures with so many odd interpretations and burdensome restrictions that they were hardly recognizable. Furthermore, church leaders restricted access to the scriptures by the common man by every resource that was within their power. The scripture contained words that, if they became incarnate in the believer would bring life and freedom—including freedom from an ecclesiastical system that had become a corrupt slave master. The Holy Spirit penetrated through all this into the spirit of a Catholic monk by the name of Martin Luther—largely through the explosive, liberating message of Paul’s letter to the Galatians as well as his letter to the Romans. This was the Word become life within Luther, and the seed of the Protestant Reformation to come.

Luther’s response was to make scripture—not papal encyclicals and bulls—the center and source of spiritual life. This was an invaluable correction to the corrupt system that Luther inherited. But this was only a partial revelation that is only now becoming more full and complete. Luther still did not fully trust the ability of the common man to see and hear with eyes and ears of the Spirit the liberating truths contained in scripture. So, while much of the corruption and false teaching that had been added to scripture was corrected by the Reform movement, there was one fatal component of the old (Roman) paradigm left in place, and this was the prominence of a professional clergy class.

I am not going to go into the origins of the clergy/laity division that occurred fairly early in church history and became a permanent fixture by the fourth century. There is much that has been written about this, and I invite the reader to search this history out further. The point that I would wish to make here is that this system of church hierarchy that was left in place in the Reformation, depends upon the elevation of scripture to a place of idolatry. By elevating scripture to a place of sole authority in the life of the believer, great emphasis must then be placed upon the proper understanding and interpretation of this scripture. This is, of course, not a matter that can be entrusted to lay persons and the common

man! When scripture is elevated to this idolatrous place, proper interpretation can only be entrusted to a professional clergy class who are educated in all manner of hermeneutics so as to render a true interpretation of scripture. This only reinforces the chasm between clergy and laity—a chasm that is totally absent from scripture itself; absent, that is, except for what is a chastisement to the church in Pergamos by Christ in Revelation that they hold to the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. It is generally accepted that this refers to an accepted practice of one group or individual in the church “lording it over” the rest. Apparently, the impulse for a separate clergy class was already being experienced by the time of the writing of Revelation. And it wasn’t well received by the King of kings!

So it is, I believe, that maintaining an ecclesiastical hierarchy, with a fundamental distinction between clergy and laity, has depended upon, and in turn reinforced, what has been termed by the 17th-century English preacher William Law as *bibliolatry*. This system of church hierarchy draws upon this elevation of scripture as its very *raison d’etre*. If it were the case (as scripture itself says it is!) that the Holy Spirit is our teacher, and that we do not need another to teach us, there would be no need for a professional clergy.

IN CONCLUSION

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God! The Word is within each of us who have surrendered wholly to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It (He) is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (Heb. 4:12; NKJV). The written words on the pages of scripture are not capable of this miraculous work; in and of themselves they are dead as a door nail. It is only the quickening of the words on these pages by the true Word that brings this life giving power. And He is speaking among His people today in powerful ways that can only be heard as we listen to Him from the depths of our spirit.

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