

# Whatever Happened to the Bible?

*by: Ronald L. Dart*

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Years ago, I was a member of the faculty of a small college in England, and I taught a class called Old Testament Survey. My time in England was one of the happiest times of my life, as I got to teach the Bible, seven classroom hours a week in two classes with very bright, inquisitive students. The other class was the epistles of Paul.

My first Old Testament Survey class was composed of 12 students. All of them were intelligent and highly motivated. It broke my heart to have to give so many 'A's at the end of that first semester. The way the class was taught was, in nine months of school, we had to read the entire Old Testament. Each class required the reading of several chapters, and there were three classes every week. When we came to class, I would take off into whatever I thought was important, and I would take all their questions. It was a give-and-take discussion type of class. I would often have a pop quiz. It was 10 quick short answer questions, whenever I felt like it. It had the byproduct of causing the students to study together, trying to figure out what the questions would be each week, and the net result was, they got to know a lot about the Old Testament in the mere nine months.

One day, a year or so later, I came to class for a section of the Old Testament that should have raised dozens of questions. It was a tough part of the book that we were studying. I had no quiz that day because I couldn't take the time away from what I figured would be a long and vigorous discussion. I opened the class, by saying, "Are there any questions." No one raised their hand. I ask again. Still no hands. I closed my Bible and I said, "Class dismissed. If you haven't prepared. We have nothing to talk about." I walked out the door. Needless to say, that never happened again.

Later, I would say a few weeks later, I challenged the class with the verse out of the book of Proverbs. It was Proverbs 17 verse 16 and it reads this way, "Why is there a price in the hand of a fool to get wisdom, seeing he has no heart to it." Why, I wondered, are you paying tuition, sitting through classes here, if you have no heart for it. You are not cattle to be driven, you're not sheep to be herded, you are self actuated men and women. If you aren't willing to work at this, go home and get a job. Now that was a long time ago and far away.

## **Bible-Reading Church**

When I was a lot younger, I was associated with a church, which was, hands-down, the most Bible reading group of people I have ever known. With all the faults of that generation and

it's leadership, they really had a passion for the Bible, and if I may say so, if it weren't for them, I doubt that I would be here doing what I am doing today.

Here we are now, in a generation, where Bible study doesn't seem to be valued like it once was.

### **Our Founding Fathers Were Bible-Reading Men**

There was a generation, back in the founding of our country, that was Biblically literate. All the great leaders of our founding and succeeding generations were Bible reading men, and the Bible was honored. You have to understand that in that generation, you weren't educated if you hadn't read the Bible. It was just too dominant a feature of culture at the time. The Bible was widely read by statesmen and laymen alike. In many homes, it was the only book available. Some people learn to read from the Bible.

Now I feel safe in saying that, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Christian faith was far more informed by the Bible, than our generation of Christians are right now. The Bible was variously interpreted, but it was nevertheless the final authority for belief and practice.

### **Christians No Longer Read the Bible Regularly**

Now something entirely different seems to be the authority for belief and practice. Exhibit number one, the Episcopal Church in America, which has consecrated a practicing homosexual as a bishop. This would never have happened in generations past. Why? Because everyone read the Bible. What seems singularly unfortunate is the obvious fact that Christians no longer read the Bible regularly.

Now this is a problem. Where have we gone astray? What can we do about it? I want to think out loud about this today and I hope you'll follow along with me.

### **What Comes Too Easy Is Not Valued**

Principle number one that we have to know. What comes too easily is not valued. When I first came into the faith, there was no recording devices available. There was no cassette tape recorder. There weren't even reel to reel recorders. There was no television. There was radio. There were books, and there was the Bible, and consequently we were dependent on two things, print media, and being physically present when and where the Bible was taught. That's how we got it.

I remember when some people thought nothing of driving two hours to that church, I was talking about, where the Bible was honored and they would sit through a three hour service. Why would they do that? Because they were hungry, not for sandwiches, but for the 'word' of God. It really came as a surprise to me one day when I realized they didn't want shorter services, they wanted to learn the Bible. They would gladly sit through an hour and a half

sermon, I will confess there were some disgruntlement when one guy gave a three-hour sermon, but nevertheless, they would sit there, because that was how they were able to learn.

### **A Marvelous Invention**

But then, this marvelous invention, I do not know who invented it, but he was a genius, the cassette tape and recorder came along. That wonderful invention made it possible to listen to a sermon, anytime and almost anyplace. You could listen to it in bed at night. You could listen driving to work in your car. You could listen ironing the clothes, taking a walk. Make no mistake, it was a wonderful invention.

### **As the 'Word' Became Easier It Tended to be Valued Less**

But as the 'word' became easier, it tended to be valued less. There is just no getting around it. Electronic media has played a very big part in turning us into a church of consumers, rather than participants. This is not a new phenomenon. The time was, when the only place the average man had access to the 'word', at all, was in church. He had no Bible. He might not have even been able to read. There may not have been a Bible in his own language. They were in Greek and Hebrew and Latin. The priest would read the Scriptures and tell the people what they meant.

Two developments came about, at about the same time, toward the end of the 15th century. First was the Gutenberg press, made possible by the invention of movable metal type. Second was the translation of the Bible into English by William Tyndale.

### **William Tyndale**

Now you should know a little bit about William Tyndale. You can look him up on the Internet, even Wikipedia has a good summary of his life. William Tyndale was born around 1494. He was educated at Oxford. He was admitted to the degree of bachelor of arts in 1512. He became a master of arts in 1515, shortly after he had been ordained to the priesthood at the age of 21. The MA degree allowed him to start studying theology, but the official course did not include the study of Scripture. Now I had to laugh when I read that. I said, "How can you study theology without studying Scripture?" Well theology is the study of religion and religious belief, not necessarily the Bible. That horrified Tyndale, so he organized private groups for teaching and discussing the Scriptures.

Tyndale was a gifted linguist, fluent in French, Greek, Hebrew, German, Italian, Latin, Spanish and of course English. His opinions got him in trouble fairly consistently. In 1512, he was summoned in and given the charge of heresy. Soon afterward, he would determine he was going to translate the Bible into English. He was convinced that the way to God was through His 'word,' and that Scripture should be available to the common people.

It was described that he had an argument with a learned and blasphemous clergyman who asserted to Tyndale, "We had better be without God's laws than the Pope's." In a swelling of emotion, Tyndale made his response, "I defy the Pope and all his laws and if God spares my life, I will cause the boy that drives the plow in England to know more of the Scriptures than the Pope himself."

You know, I don't think to this day, that we realize what a landmark occasion this was when this man did this. How it has changed civilization. How it has changed our civilization. How it even laid the foundations for the creation of the United States of America. It is a powerful thing and a big change took place.

Poor Tyndale was strangled, and his body burned at the stake, in October of 1536, because of persecution in religion. He was a mere 42 years old. Seventy three years later, the King James Bible appeared and the consequences of that are incalculable.

### **We Take the Bible for Granted**

Only God knows how many men lost their lives to produce this book, the Bible, which we take for granted. William Tyndale was only one who lost his life. And following the law of unintended consequences, he made it easier for people to lay their Bible aside thinking, "I'll read this later."

I saw displayed in a Bible Study in a church where the teacher asked, "How many of you read the Scriptures assigned for this week." Not a single hand went up. Now I have no idea what the members of that Bible class were thinking, perhaps, "Well, I already know those Scriptures" or "I'll just get them in the Bible Study itself. I will go and I'll listen and I will just soak it up."

You know, I understand that mind set all too well. When I was in high school, I was allergic to homework. I was a smart kid. I got most of it in class. I got by. I said to myself, "I'll get it in class." I graduated in the bottom quarter of my graduating class from high school.

Now I hasten to add that I was an "A" student in college. After four years in the Navy and I had learned a few bitter lessons.

Bible study may be too easy and you can take it for granted and the consequences are more severe than ranking low in your graduating class.

But making it available to you, did not come easily. There's a string of men and women back through time, who sacrificed, so you could have it easy. They didn't do it so you could decorate your coffee table with a leather bound Bible.

## **Criticism and Emotion**

That church, I mentioned that I attended long ago, that was so devoted to Bible Study was not without its criticism. One criticism was, "Well it's a knowledge-based tradition." I thought, "As opposed to what? An ignorance-based tradition." One minister I used to know, was always frustrated by the lack of feeling and emotion in that church. Now I understood it entirely, but his efforts to create that emotion were for its own sake. It did not arise naturally, and to me, it just seemed contrived and I think it did to everybody else too.

Now it would be wrong to think though, that was an unemotional tradition in that church. I often prayed with tears running down my cheeks, but it was always in private. I became emotional in a sermon on occasion, but when I did, it arose from the heart and the content and it was in no way a pretense or an attempt to add some emotion to the sermon.

## **We Need the Bible to Know God**

You know, when you get back around to this question, how on earth are we going to come to know God without the Bible? And isn't knowing God, a form of knowledge?

Proverbs 1 verse seven says this, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction." I suppose my close association with the Old Testament somewhat influences my approach to this day. I used to go through the book of Proverbs periodically as a part of my prayer life. I got started doing that by going through the book of Psalms as part of my prayer life. When I got to the end of the Psalms one year and I thought, "Why don't I go all the way through the book of Proverbs." I had no idea what I was letting myself in for.

## **Wisdom Cries Out**

Early on I read this, it was in Proverbs chapter 1 verse 20, "Wisdom cries out, she utters her voice in the streets." Mind you, he's saying she's not hidden off in the wilderness somewhere, or an enclosed room, she's out in the streets. {21} "She cries in the chief places of the concourse, in the openings of the gates in the city. She utters her words saying, {22} "How long, you simple ones, are you going to love simplicity? How long are the scorner's going to delight in their scorning, and how long are fools going to hate knowledge? {23} Turn at my reproof, behold, I'll pour out my spirit on you, I'll make my words known to you."

Now this is really kind of a shocking thing when you read through it and I have to admit, I have never been called a 'fool' so often in my entire life, and was so struck by it that first time when I went through the book of Proverbs, verse by verse, as a part of my prayer life.

Wisdom goes on to say, {24} "I called, you refused. I stretched out my hand, nobody paid any attention. {25} You discarded my counsel, you wouldn't have any of my reproof, tell you what, {26} I'm going to laugh at your calamity, I'll mock when your fear comes, {27}

When your fear comes as a desolation, and your destruction comes like a whirlwind, {28} Then you will call upon me and I won't answer, then they'll seek me early, but they will not find me, {29} For they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord your God."

### **Stay Close to the Trunk of the Tree**

Now I have to tell you, we had some very good values impressed on our hearts in those days of serious Bible reading. A favorite analogy, compared knowledge and doctrine to a tree. We were urged to stay close to the 'trunk of the tree', to know when we're getting out on a limb, or hanging by a twig. We knew there were false teachers and thanks to the book of Proverbs we knew there were fools on every corner.

How could we tell the difference? Well, we were to be like the Bereans, that Luke mentions in Acts 17 and verse 11, "These people were more noble than those in Thessalonica in that they received the word with all readiness of mind and searched the Scriptures daily, whether these things were so." In our day, one would just as soon come to church without a Bible as without his trousers. Without a Bible at church, we just didn't feel dressed.

Now I feel no need to go back to that era, but I do think we should show a little more respect for the customs of the people who laid the groundwork that we are standing on.

### **Prove All Things**

We also had a watchword, a model if you will, it is in first Thessalonians 5 verse 21, "Prove all things, hold fast to that which is good." Another one was, "Don't believe me, believe your Bible." For those people who could hold onto those ideas they served them well. We did have a flaw in that old Bible reading church I was talking about. We were self-righteous and we looked down on others. But then, any of us are hardly free from that sin these days, are we?

### **A Passion for the Bible**

If there's one spirit, I wish we could recapture from the old church, as from the 18th. century, perhaps from the 19th. century, it is a passion for the Bible.

Studying the Bible today requires a greater amount of personal discipline than it did back in the 17th century. No one is going to make you do it, because it is always there, you can lie down right beside it and go to sleep and the fact is there are plenty of things you can do to distract yourself. Back in the good old days, there was no television, no radio, only a lamp to read by and sometimes nothing else to read but the Bible and so consequently, maybe we could say it was easier then.

## **A Famine of the Word**

Funny thing, sometimes it's the scarcity of the thing that really makes it precious. There's a Scripture in Amos eight verse 11 that I think is interesting. It says, "Behold, the days come, says the Lord God, I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD. {12} They shall wander from sea to sea, and from North to the East, they shall go to and fro, and seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it." Now it does seem strange that there would be a famine in the midst of plenty, doesn't it? But what I think he's saying is that, God will go silent to man as he sometimes has in the past and we will have nothing left but the Bible, a book we really don't know very much about and I suppose we could even lose that. You think not, let me tell you of the people who did.

## **Lutheran Women**

I once read a story of some Lutheran women in the old Soviet Union. The Soviets were determined to stamp out religion so they arrested all of the pastors and all of the men and shipped them off to Siberia. Only the women and children were left behind. Their Bibles were taken away, but they continued to meet together and to worship and from what they had memorized, they began in secret to reconstruct the Bible. Finally, when the Soviet Union died and the surviving men returned, they found the church still alive and with a surprisingly complete Bible. They found it, because up until that time, people had taken the Bible very seriously and had read it so regularly that parts of it had been committed to memory.

Now no one would want to make the Bible into an Idol, but it's the source of our faith. It is the 'well' from which we draw water. There is no other 'well' to draw from and when we cease going to the 'well', we are going to, pardon the obvious analogy, slowly but surely dry up and blow away.

## **Our Society Today is a Moral Landslide**

I look at our society today, in what someone so aptly called the 'Moral Landslide', and I'll tell you where God is going to lay the responsibility for that. He is going to lay it at the feet of Christian people. Oh I know, all of the pagans amongst us, all of the irreligious, the secularists and so forth, they are all going to suffer for their part in it, but the ones God is going to hold particularly responsible is Christians. Why? Because they have stopped going to the 'well'. That is, the failure of Christian people to read the Bible, that has slowly but surely destroyed our influence in the society that is around us. We are taking our direction from society. We are taking our directions from customs. We are taking our direction from what feels good. We are taking our direction from, God forbid, Hollywood, not from the Bible. Our morals would form the background, the backbone, I should say of the morals of the whole country, if we had any.

## **In The Last Days**

Paul wrote to Timothy, in second Timothy chapter 3 verse one, "This know also, in the last days perilous times shall come. {2} For men will be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy." How about that for description of our generation? {5} "Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof, turn away from these people. {6} They who creep in the houses and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with various lusts, {7} Ever learning, and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth."

Having a form of godliness, that almost suggests that they were church going people. They are leaders, of what shall we say, Christian people, who creep into houses and lead captive silly women. It kind of reads like the news we see sometimes. We must look unto Christians for the moral backbone of the country.

## **Twisting Scripture**

Peter wrote in second Peter chapter 3 verse 14, "Wherefore, beloved, seeing you look for such things be diligent that you may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless, {15} And account that the long-suffering of our Lord is salvation, even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given to him has written to you, {16} As in all of his epistles, speaking of them of these things, in which there are some things hard to be understood, which they who are unlearned and unstable twist, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction."

Tell me something. How would you know when this is going on? When people are twisting Scriptures to their own end. You won't! Unless you are able to fit all these things into a bigger picture. This is what was going on in the old days when people wrote the Scriptures down and went home and read them again in context. They had come to church, listened to the sermon, wrote down some notes about the Scriptures, then they went home and read them. This is what the Bereans were doing and it is what some Christians have even done in my lifetime. They would go home and they were fitting these passages of Scripture into what they already knew about the Bible. It was in the abandonment of those principles that those old friends of mine made shipwreck of that church when they walked away from the Scriptures.

## **Scripture and Fruits**

Paul was very concerned about this and left instruction for all the men that he had worked with and how they would carry on. He wrote to the Thessalonians, in second Thessalonians 2 verse 15, "Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold on to the traditions you have been taught, by word or by our epistle." Tradition is important. It has to be tested by the Bible, but the burden of proof is on those who would move away from it.



How can you tell if you're out on the twigs and leaves and away from the trunk of the tree? How can you know if this or that teacher is leading you down the garden path? There are some tests. The first is in Scripture, not in proof texts, not in single verse, but in the context near and far. The second is by the fruits, and this is fundamental. If this new idea, or this teaching or whatever it is that somebody's trying to bring across, separates brethren, then something is rotten in Denmark. I'm not talking about beliefs here. No two of us hold exactly the same beliefs on all things. I'm talking about doctrine, that is, what we have decided as a group that were going to teach. I am talking about the trunk of the tree. The core doctrines that distinguishes us as the body, all of which must be laid on the foundation of the Bible.

Paul wrote to Timothy, "Hold fast to the form of sound words." How do you do that? You do it with a passion for the Bible. You do it with a hunger for the grand meaning of God's word. That's how it's done!

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