

Could you be in jeopardy not knowing the Bible?

by William Martin

One day several years ago, my wife and I were watching one of our favorite television game shows -- the quiz show *Jeopardy*. That day, as I seem to remember, the three contestants competing on the show had done quite well with the various answer categories available in the game, displaying impressive knowledge of a wide range of "heady" subjects. I don't remember exactly what the answer categories were that day, but I'm certain they were typical for the game -- probably a mix of ancient and modern history, politics, geography, literature, science, and people famous in many diverse ways. However, the contestants noticeably managed to avoid one of the categories on the board, titled "Books of the Bible". When the game's players had exhausted the answers in the other categories with time still left in the round, they finally had no choice but to face the only remaining subject. Their embarrassing ignorance of the Bible quickly became obvious to all, when at first they made several desperate guesses to name books that they must have thought sounded vaguely biblical. After they all failed in their attempts, they eventually stopped pushing their response buttons so as to conserve their winnings. My wife and I turned to each other with our lower jaws figuratively striking the floor. Between the three otherwise brilliant contestants on the show that day, I don't think they managed to get more than, perhaps, a single question right of the five answers shown in that category. How could these highly intelligent people with apparently well rounded interests know so much about academic subjects, yet almost nothing about the Bible?

Since that stunning display of today's vacuum of Bible knowledge, which is actually quite common now throughout western society, my wife and I have, many times, discussed the topic of widespread Biblical illiteracy. Yes, there is startling Biblical illiteracy even in "Christian" nations, or worse, even among people who are very involved attending the church of their choice. Knowing a bit about western European history, I realize that this problem isn't unique to our high-tech, fast-paced modern world of overwhelming distractions and entertainment. But sadly, this condition of willful neglect to familiarize the otherwise well-educated with the most influential collection of writings in the history of at least the western cultures of the world, is a shame and completely without excuse.

For much of the history of Christendom, people living in what were considered to be Christian nations were forced by circumstances to remain mostly in the dark about what was really stated by the holy scriptures of the Judeo-Christian Bible. For more than a thousand years after the canon of the Bible texts had been settled, there were relatively few people who were capable of reading, or worse yet, who were allowed to read, the actual text of these venerated writings. People were expected by their church and their society to live moral lives, but the toiling peasants had to take someone else's word about exactly what that required of

them, as well as any revelation about what God was like and what He wanted from wretched human beings, or what He had to offer to the obedient, other than a vague hope of avoiding an unmentionable experience after death. Specifically, the dirty masses of mankind had to rely on the elite few who had been trained to read the scriptures and dispense Biblical knowledge – the clergy of the “universal” Christian church. In those days, even innocent questions from church parishioners about doctrinal details weren’t much tolerated, let alone any whiff of dissident opinion. In essence, what someone was expected to believe, in a religious sense, was unilaterally determined by the church and uniformly dictated for everyone.

During Europe’s dark ages, to get more than just a momentary glimpse of mysterious letters on a page of a Bible, you had to be privileged to be accepted as a student under the guidance of the clergy, and they didn’t exactly accept anyone who would like to apply. Such students came mostly from well-connected and wealthy families, and were exclusively male. Peasants and women were simply not considered worth educating, or worse, if they learned too much might actually question and challenge the power and status of the priests and prelates of the day. Even if you managed somehow, through hook or by crook, to gain the skill of reading in your native tongue, the clergy of the church had been careful to keep the Bible encoded in languages esoteric to most of the peoples of Europe and near-east Asia – namely the ancient Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic languages.

Sometime in the late middle ages of European history, and transitioning into the period known as the Renaissance, there arose men who had either been educated by the church as clergymen, or had been able privately to attain a sufficient knowledge of the ancient Biblical languages, and who sought to make the books of the Bible accessible to the public by translating those writings into the common European tongues. Men such as John Wyclif (c. 1320-1384), Martin Luther (1483-1546), Myles Coverdale (c. 1488-1569), William Tyndale (c. 1494-1536), John Rogers (c. 1500-1555), and William Whittingham (c. 1524-1579) knew very well what was actually written in the pages of the holy scriptures, and they also knew that the church of those times had claimed as divine revelation much that was simply unscriptural and extra-biblical (or from outside the Bible). These men pitied the illiterate peasants who had been taught many erroneous religious notions by the clergy of the church. The church of that time controlled its parishioners by teaching a mind-numbing mix of distorted legend and ignorant superstition in order to instill fear and dread among the parishioners, instead of proclaiming the liberating truth contained in the Bible. The men who advocated widespread Biblical literacy not only possessed a love of the scriptures, but also a devotion to truth. These men were inspired to risk their lives by daring to defy the edicts of church councils and royal decrees against making the scriptures available for every man to read. Some of these brave translators of the Bible texts were exiled from their homeland, or worse, were imprisoned and tortured. A few of these men, such as Tyndale and Rogers, were even martyred by order of the

Holy Roman Empire, or by monarchs who were obliged to carry out the death sentences of the papacy.¹

Before the development of the printing press in Europe around the year 1450 by Johannes Gutenberg, there were very few manuscript copies of any writings to aid in fostering general literacy. The printing press made possible the mass production of reading material, which was one of the principal forces contributing to the intellectual reawakening in Europe known as the Renaissance. During that time, the main source of writings for mass printing was the Bible and religious treatises. This new channel of communication made it possible to methodically question and challenge long accepted teachings of the church which were often not in harmony with the liberating message of hope recorded in the Bible, especially in the New Testament. As was the case in the days of the Apostles, the gospel message recorded in the New Testament threatened to upset and transform human society by liberating people not only from the sufferings of sin, but also from the control of self-serving religious rulers enriching themselves at the people's expense. Printing the Bible in the vernacular and distributing the copies soon became outlawed in many areas of Europe, as was the mere possession of a Bible without approval by church officials. In 1543, the English Parliament decreed it was a crime for an unlicensed person (everyone except the clergy) to read or explain the Scriptures in public.²

Along with the quest to translate the Bible into languages which would enable men of all classes and stations to read the Almighty's wonderful message of hope for themselves, came a rather revolutionary opinion that the universal church had much for which to answer. This movement, which spread across Western Europe despite the most determined efforts of the church's clergy to stamp it out, eventually became known as the Protestant Reformation. One of the slogans of that revolution was "Sola Scriptura", which is Latin for religious belief based directly from or by "scripture alone."³ These protesters openly criticized the church's vast accumulation of wealth and political power, as well as the personal enrichment and indulgences of the bishops. Also, these protesters were no longer willing to take someone else's word for what the Bible had to say, nor what it really meant, which determined what people were bound to believe. Instead, thanks to the outlaw translators of the Holy Scriptures, people who could obtain the skill of reading in their spoken tongue could read for themselves the teachings attributed to the Almighty Creator and to His only-begotten Son and Messiah, as recorded by Their faithful witnesses in the various books of the Bible. Then, without suspect interpretations woven by the clergy, the readers of the scriptures could discuss with others who had carefully read the Holy Words for themselves, and decide what the message and teachings of the Bible actually were, and how those teachings were to be applied to everyday life. This truly amounted to breaking the bonds of ritual propaganda, suppression of human intellect, and effective slavery through thought control. Nothing in human history was ever more revolutionary than this new opportunity for the laity to personally read the Bible, the inspired

message of the Creator, and enjoy the freedom as individuals to follow one's own conscience in religious devotion.

Now, in the 21st century, there is almost no land on Earth where people cannot learn to read if they desire. In fact, most people in technologically developed nations can and do read prodigiously. Yet, in so-called "Christian" nations, where we might expect to find widespread knowledge about the contents and message of the Bible, we find that many who claim to be Christians have instead chosen to return to the ignorance of their ancestors who couldn't read, and would now again rather take someone else's word about what the Book, the Bible, has to say, and what it means. Amazingly, many people today are quite comfortable trusting what other people tell them to believe, rather than investigating whether there is any sound scriptural basis for adopting a particular belief. We must be vigilant to guard against what the ancient prelates practiced – the control and manipulation of ignorant people, in order to enrich and magnify those who dispense so-called knowledge. How can otherwise intelligent people who claim to practice the Christian faith, who believe they are liberated from the ignorance of darker eras, neglect to invest at least a modest amount of their own time to read the Bible for themselves? Is ignorance really so blissful? Is laziness, or indifference, or being too busy actually worth the risk of being misled and controlled by others, possibly even being misled to destruction?

Are you going to neglect the opportunity and privilege of reading the actual words of the Bible for yourself -- an opportunity and privilege which was denied to generations of poor souls whose minds thirsted for the refreshment of the Holy Word? Many brave persons died to make possible the ready access to owning and reading the Bible which we often take for granted today. Don't allow others to control your beliefs by spinning their personal religious agendas without at least checking, and if necessary, challenging their claims of what the Bible message really is. After all, you don't want to be in jeopardy not knowing the Bible.

¹ Frederic G. Kenyon, "English Versions" in *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909.

Available online at <http://www.bible-researcher.com/kenyon1.html>

² The Alexander S. Lawson Archive, archive for 'A Printer's Almanac', entry for Oct. 2, 2010.

Available online at <http://www.lawsonarchive.com/october-2/>

³ "What Do We Mean by Sola Scriptura?" by Dr. W. Robert Godfrey. An article which originally appeared as Chapter 1 in *Sola Scriptura! The Protestant Position on the Bible*; Don Kistler, General Editor, and published by Soli Deo Gloria Publications.

Available online at http://www.the-highway.com/Sola_Scriptura_Godfrey.html