

“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” Exodus 20:4

No Graven Image

One

The idea that I might be guilty of idolatry shocked me. I was a Baptist. I had never had any statues in my home depicting God, and to this day, I still plead innocent to any charge I might have made fame, wealth, or power my God. No. My idolatry assumed a benign, Protestant guise. I found it difficult to admit that, for most of my adult life, the Bible was an idol—an equivalent or substitute for God. To put a name to my error, I thought I invented the word *bibliolatry* and only later discovered it in a dictionary.

Two

I believe my journey down this path began when I was a teenager. In addition to being naïve and impressionable, I was no thinker. I made pretty good grades in school, but I had no sense of self-awareness. I felt pretty much like a nobody.

Into that vacuum rode my older brother and his wife. They took me to a small Baptist mission church they had joined. It was a warm, friendly group, and I felt accepted. The church became a second family to me. Adopting their ways, their beliefs, their theology was a step I took without question. Allegiance to the Bible bound us together.

When I left home to attend a Baptist college, I changed very little except becoming more deeply invested in a Bible universe. In discussions in the men’s dorm, we assumed we were “closer to the Bible” than any other sect. If someone proved us to be in error in some minor point, we would change immediately and still be closer to the Bible than others.

My subsequent involvement in the Baptist world extended to founding two churches, graduating from a Baptist seminary, working professionally in Baptist churches, and being elected to leadership positions in denominational life. I received denominational acceptance by moving from a small church to a larger one, then to a larger one. That’s the way the system worked. All these things transpired without ever questioning what I thought about the Bible, God, church, or religion in general.

Every particle of our church life involved the Bible. Every sermon, Sunday school lesson, and summer church school focused on what the Bible said and what it meant. I never saw that interpreting a Bible passage is only necessary if the meaning is not clear.

Three

Through the years, the Bible was to my Baptist life as the sun to the planets. We defended tasks we attempted, supported, or opposed, using verses, passages, or ideas we found in the scriptures.

The Bible was our source of knowledge about God. We found out how to worship, customs to follow, ideas and activities to promote and support, structure for our church life, and standards of conduct in the Bible. The Bible spoke with the voice and authority of God.

We carried New Testaments in our vest pockets, handling it carefully, reading, and marking important passages. We treated it with reverence, just as we would act towards God if

God were present. If someone attacked the Bible, we rose to its defense. When a passage seemed impossible to understand, my favorite stopper was: “We don’t understand it, but it’s in the Bible.” A Bible citation supported every argument. My world was marked by a devotion to a literal interpretation of Scripture unless the passage indicated otherwise.

Four

I began to see things differently when I left the professional ministry. If I had not changed professions, I would have been unable to change my thinking or perceptions. I was too invested in my Baptist world. I resigned after one year on the staff of one of the flagship Southern Baptist churches in California. My wife was teaching public school, and I got a part-time job with the Westinghouse Learning Corporation. I finished a teaching credential in the space of one year.

Becoming a public school teacher, including teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) for seven years, was another step. Working in a public school, I interacted with people whose lives and philosophies differed from the culture where I grew up. Teaching classes populated entirely by students from other countries, languages, and cultures opened my eyes.

While I left the professional ministry, I continued in Bible study. In fear and trembling, I questioned traditional Baptist beliefs, like the Trinity, the atonement, baptism, the church, and other doctrines. I asked questions, and no one threw me out of Christian groups. I received encouragement to explore from Presbyterians whose church became mine by default.

Then I stumbled upon a group of late 20th century scholars, called the Jesus Seminar, who devoted years to studying the sayings of Jesus. I found solace in learning qualified scholars were asking questions similar to the questions I had been asking. There was more than one way to look at the Bible.

The inspiration of the Scriptures is a critical doctrine to Baptists. While “inspired” means different things to different Baptists, there could never have been a discussion about the Bible without that word or its equivalent. It labeled the Bible as an authority. The Bible spoke for God. Most Baptists believe God preserved it intact through the ages.

However, a historical study of inspiration of the Scriptures reveals more holes in it than a sieve. Church leaders did not agree on the 27 writings included in the New Testament till 350 years after the death of Jesus. Since there was no New Testament for a writer to refer to, any Biblical references to ‘inspiration’ had to refer to something else. The Bible, like an arrow, cannot point to itself. Apparent contradictions in the scriptures produced a frenzy of rhetorical maneuvers to maintain the fiction that the 66 books were one unit with one theme from one source.

Do I believe the Bible is inspired? Yes and no. I love the 23rd Psalm. “The Lord is my shepherd, etc.” I have gone to that Psalm many times for comfort. I feel it is inspired, not because it got included in a book with a black cover but because it speaks to me. The Sermon on the Mount is inspired. It speaks to me. But the pages and pages of genealogies citing who begat whom, line after line, fail the test. They mean nothing to me. To me, those pages are not inspired.

Any writing that speaks to the heart and mind of a person is inspired. The words might be a psalm of David or a poem by Robert Frost. Their source is almost irrelevant, whether from the Quran, the sayings of Confucius, William Shakespeare, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, or the Bible.

Did I trash the Bible? I don't think so. I still love and admire the Bible as literature, but I do not worship it or consider it a substitute for God.

The most liberating change I have had on my journey is also the most difficult to describe. For lack of a better term, I call it *GodPresent*. It means experiencing God in every aspect of life, from the most mundane to the most esoteric, from the sublime to the base. *GodPresent*, in the circumstances and events of every day and every hour, has meant for me a whole new way of looking at life.

The God I knew in my earlier days would have cared if I have a correct belief. But *GodPresent* is not threatened by a person who believes "incorrectly." Why should God care how we split theological hairs or double-dog dare anyone who holds a different view? Was God thrown into a tizzy when I was an idolater? I doubt it. Am I more pleasing to God now than I was before? Probably not. I can live with a simple philosophy.

If God is concerned about anything, I believe it must be that we be good people. Be thoughtful. Be merciful. Be forgiving. Be generous. Just be nice. I think that might please God.