

*Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 9/1-2 (1998): 5–12.  
Article copyright © 2000 by Roland J. Hill.

## **Unchaining the Bible: Putting the Bible Back in the Pew**

Roland J. Hill  
Southwestern Adventist University

While teaching a summer New Testament class, I discovered to my dismay the serious biblical illiteracy among college students. I was teaching in the first epistles of John and simply referred to Nicodemus to make a point. Thinking the reference to Nicodemus needed no further explanation, I continued the lecture.

“Who’s Nicodemus?” came the honest query of a puzzled student. Before I could respond, another student chimed in, “Yeah, who is this Nicodemus?” I was stunned. One student had graduated from one of our academies and the other attended public school until college but had grown up in the church. How could they be so uninformed about the Bible? Probably you have experienced something similar in recent years. The biblical illiteracy among believers is astounding. We see it in the Sabbath School. We see it in Bible discussions. We see it in our academy and college classrooms. To me, this is clear evidence that the Bible is no longer in the pew. Oh yes, the physical display of the Bible is there. The book racks of our pews are filled with Bibles available for use during the service, should there be some call to open them. But who is reading the Bible? Who is studying the Bible? Who really cares about the Bible? If we are honest, we must confess that the Bible has very little real meaning in the life of most affluent Christians.

The spiritual lethargy and illiteracy that haunts our churches and schools testifies to the modern-day chaining of the Word of God. Something has bound the Word and is keeping it out of the pew. Uncovering and breaking the chains that shackle Scripture, I believe, is the primary work of today’s Bible teachers. We need to break the fetters that are holding believers back from the serious study of God’s Word. Putting the Bible back in the pew is not just something nice, but it is necessary. Revival and reformation will only come as we unchain the Bible and get God’s people back into the diligent study of God’s Word.

## *JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

Satan understands how powerful the Bible is in the pew and has worked through the centuries to keep the Bible away from believers. It was his demonic workings that brought on the darkest period of the Christian church.

Satan well knew that the Holy Scriptures would enable men to discern his deceptions and withstand his power. It was by the word that even the Savior of the world had resisted his attacks. At every assault, Christ presented the shield of eternal truth, saying, 'It is written.' To every suggestion of the adversary, He opposed the wisdom and power of the word. In order for Satan to maintain his sway over men, and establish the authority of the papal usurper, he must keep them in ignorance of the Scriptures. The Bible would exalt God and place finite men in their true position; therefore its sacred truths must be concealed and suppressed. This logic was adopted by the Roman Church. For hundreds of years the circulation of the Bible was prohibited. The people were forbidden to read it or have it in their houses, and unprincipled priests and prelates interpreted its teachings to sustain their pretensions.<sup>1</sup>

Historians record that during the Dark Ages, in many instances the Bible was chained to the walls of church libraries to keep it from the laity. The chaining of the Bible during this dark period of Christianity resulted in the widespread ignorance that characterized the people of that time.

Are we not experiencing a similar blight of blindness and biblical illiteracy among believers today? Of course, there are no prohibitions against having the Bible in the home or studying the Bible, but it is evident, as mentioned earlier, that the Bible in the pew is rarely opened. It seems to me that there is a black cloud over the Word in this so called age of enlightenment. I seem to hear the rattling of chains in the distance. Could it be the sounds of the modern-day chains that are keeping the Bible out of the pew?

### **Three Chains that Enslave**

I believe the rattling that we hear in the distance are those chains that have enslaved the people of God. In fact, I believe I have caught sight of three of those chains: the chain of affluence, the chain of academia, and the chain of apathy. Let's consider each chain separately.

**The Chain of Affluence.** First, let's look at the chain of affluence. There is a liberating aspect to God's Word. As believers search the Scriptures, many experience both spiritual and financial freedom. The liberating message of the Bible causes many to ascend the economic ladder, moving from the bottom rungs to at least the middle rungs. But the very prosperity that becomes a testament of the liberating power of God's word ends up placing a person at the point of thinking he doesn't need God's Word. The very gift of prosperity, which God intends to bring freedom and endow His work, ends up enslaving.

God warned about the perils of prosperity.

---

<sup>1</sup> E. G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 51.

## *HILL: UNCHAINING THE BIBLE*

When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you. Beware lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; lest, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart becomes proud, and you forget the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Deut. 8:10-14)

As the chain of affluence tightens, the tendency to spend less and less time with the Word becomes noticeable. Affluence gives rise to self-sufficiency and self-sufficiency moves believers to trusting more in self than in Scripture.

**The Chain of Academia.** Then there is the chain of academia. Whether intentional or unintentional, we pastors, teachers, and administrators have communicated to students that studying about the Bible is more important than studying the Bible. We have conveyed to students that reason is higher than inspiration. We have transmitted to our students the concept that the laity will never mature in the Word. We have spoken loudly, “You will always need a scholar.” One former professor stated it this way, “the teacher must always be the teacher and the student, the student.” Our constant references to what the scholars say elevates mere men as the ultimate authority. Therefore, students feel as if they cannot do serious Bible study without the support of scholars. We have allowed church members to think that real Bible study is reserved for scholars only. E.G. White makes this statement: “The Bible was not written for the scholar alone; on the contrary, it was designed for the common people.”<sup>2</sup>

I believe the following incident highlights this intellectual chain. Shortly after beginning my teaching career I attended my first theological society meetings. While meeting other participants, I was confronted about my credentials to teach New Testament on the college level. I was asked, “What subjects do you teach?” I sheepishly replied, “I teach New Testament and Applied Theology.” “And what degree do you have?” my scholar interrogator retorted. I admitted that I had only a Doctor of Ministry degree. His intimidating reply still rings in my ears, “I thought they only allowed Ph.D.s to teach New Testament at the college level.” The message was clear— only scholars can really understand the Bible.

This chain of academic intimidation is used not only in the classroom but in the pulpit. We preachers show off our academic acrobatics in the pulpit, dazzling the saints, causing them to say as they leave the church, “Our pastor is smart. He’s deep. I will never understand the Bible like him.” This academic intimidation becomes an excuse for many to stop studying their Bibles. I cannot imagine that God is pleased with the sounds of the academic chains in our class-

---

<sup>2</sup> E. G. White, *Steps to Christ*, 89.

## *JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

rooms or pulpits. I believe we need to break the chain of academia. We need to help our students become not only students of the Word but teachers of the Word.

**The Chain of Apathy.** Finally, we must consider the chain of apathy. Perhaps of all the chains this one enslaves the greatest number of believers. Many have ambivalent feelings about the Bible. They know it is a good book, even God's Word, but they struggle with its relevance for today. There is a listlessness about the sacred things in general and the Holy Scriptures in specific. The old saying, "familiarity breeds contempt," may be a reason for the chain of apathy that chokes so many of today's Christians. With so many Bibles accessible to believers, maybe we have just taken the Bible for granted. Whatever the case, there is so little emotional attachment to the Scriptures that now many believers don't even feel bad for not reading and studying them. Jesus admonished those fettered with the chain of apathy, "I know your works and what you are doing; you are neither cold or hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm (apathetic) and neither cold or hot, I will spew you out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:15, 16).

Apathy is a sad spiritual state. It numbs believers, leaving them unaware of their true spiritual condition. This state of limbo keeps them from hearing the rattle of the chains that restrict their Bible study. We Bible teachers have a mammoth job to do. Isaiah summarizes our work as purveyors of God's Word as this: "To open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon, and those who sit in darkness from the prison." (Isaiah 42:7) The clarion call is for teachers who will break the chains, loosen the shackles, and set believers free in the Word of God.

### **Three Effective Chain Breakers**

Who best can break the chains and put the Bible back in the pew? I believe that we teachers have the greatest opportunity to loose the fetters from believers. I believe we have the greatest chance of inspiring students to become serious searchers after truth. My belief is based on what I consider to be Paul's hierarchical list of Spiritual Gifts.

In his first list of spiritual gifts, I Corinthians 12:28, teachers rank number three. But in Paul's second spiritual gifts list, Ephesians 4:11, teachers move to the number five position. Observe though, that whether teachers rank third or fifth, they are listed with the spiritual gifts that may be considered as having the greatest importance to the growth and development of the church.

Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers are all crucial to the well being of God's church. It is interesting, though, that in this list of leading spiritual gifts, all include some aspect of teaching. All are called to be purveyors of God's word. Therefore, I believe that we teachers, whether pastor, college professor, academy Bible teacher, or administrator, must take the lead in breaking the chains that hinder God's people from spending time in the Word. The

### *HILL: UNCHAINING THE BIBLE*

spiritual gift of teaching carries with it the special work of equipping and building believers. Our work builds Bible students. Our work equips believers. Our spiritual gift, more than any other gift, does more, when guided by God's spirit, to lead people into the study of the Word. Therefore, we must be ever mindful of the seriousness of the work we do, for either we will help in breaking the chains or we will assist in tightening them.

**Demystify the Tools.** What can we do to break the chain of affluence, the chain of academia, the chain of apathy and put the Bible back in the pew? I believe that there are three ways we can break these chains. First, we can demystify the tools of Bible study.

In recent years, there has developed the concept that certain tools hold the key to the complete understanding of the Bible. We, especially in the academic community, have made believers feel that without the facility of the original languages, archeological studies, and systemic theology one can never become a serious student of Scripture. We are often guilty of mystical knowledge of the kind Paul confronted in Corinth. In Corinth, there were Greeks who believed that there was a secret body of knowledge only available to an elite group. Do we consider ourselves an elite group? Are we what W.E.B. Du Bois called the "Talented Tenth"? When it comes to Bible study there are no elite groups. No one group has a corner on the market of Bible study. Paul settled the question of elitism by writing, "For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are that no man should boast before God" (I Corinthians 1:26-29).

This is not to question the value and importance of the tools. They are of great help to the sincere searcher after truth. But there is nothing magical or mysterious about the tools. The tools in and of themselves do not insure a proper revelation and interpretation of God's word. Let's demystify the tools! Why can't we teach Greek to our local elders? Why aren't we developing curriculums in the language of laymen that cover hermeneutics, archeology, and systematic theology? Why do we chain these tools to the walls of our educational institutions? Stripping away the mystery that surrounds the tools will encourage more believers to make use of these helpful instruments in their own Bible study.

**Humanize the Teacher.** The second way we can shatter the chains is by humanizing the teacher. We need to make sure that students don't deify us. It is easy for students to place us in a god-like position. We can become more than mere men to them. We are scholars, authorities, gods. Instead of mining the ore of truth for themselves, we allow our students watch us dig out precious jewels from the Scripture for them. I can tell you from experience how wonderful it feels when people come to me for answers about the deep issues of the Bible

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

and leave feeling they have heard the voice of God, even though I know it was simply my professional opinion. What an ego boost to have a class eating out of my hand as I dazzle them with my understanding of the Pauline epistles. I can tell you how it feels when I am admired for my scholarly explanation of the Word.

But if we are going to shatter the chains of affluence, academia, and apathy, if we are working to put the Bible back in the pew, we must constantly remind our students that we are mere men. We must say, like Paul and Barnabus, “Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you” (Acts 14:15). We must be heard echoing the words of Paul, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves” (I Corinthians 4:7). Students should leave our presence convinced that if God can reveal truth to the teacher, He can reveal truth to them.

Helping the student see us as human beings also means letting the student into our hearts—becoming transparent. It’s letting the student see our struggles and sometimes insecurity about the Word. But above all, we teachers must be a living testimony of the power of the Word. The Bible must first be real to us before we can make it real to our students. Have we been transformed by the Word? Is the Word of God a living force in our lives? As students observe how Bible study has impacted our lives, they are more likely to follow our example in personal Bible study. The student must see us as “living epistles.” Their excitement about Bible study will be in direct proportion to the effect of the Word on our lives.

**Lift Up the True Interpreter.** Finally, we can crush the chains and put the Bible back in the pew by uplifting the True Interpreter of Scripture. Before Jesus ascended to His Father, He left this promise, “But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). We pastors, teachers, and administrators must uphold the Holy Spirit as the True Interpreter of Scripture. We must be convinced, and convince our students, that only the Spirit of God knows the mind of God. Therefore, we must teach our students to lean on God’s Spirit for a true and complete understanding of the Word.

Our degrees and teaching experience are only parts of the interpretive equation. We must keep in mind that understanding the Bible is the work of God’s Spirit. Paraphrasing Zechariah 4:6, “not by Greek, nor by Hebrew, nor by scholarship, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.” The study of the Bible is unlike the study of any other subject. Mrs. White, explaining this point, wrote, “We should not engage in the study of the Bible with that self-reliance with which so many enter the domains of science, but with a prayerful dependence upon God and a sincere desire to learn His will. The Holy Spirit alone can cause us to feel the importance of those things easy to be understood, or prevent us

### HILL: UNCHAINING THE BIBLE

from wresting truths difficult of comprehension.”<sup>3</sup> If Bible study was simply about obtaining information, then there would be no need for spiritual insights. But searching the scripture is about receiving the breath of God. It’s about being resuscitated daily by Christ, the Living Word.

**Scripture as God’s Breath.** I discovered something a couple years ago while studying God’s Word that fastened in my mind the importance of daily Bible study. The Holy Spirit brought together for me three texts—Genesis 2:7, II Timothy 3:16, and Hebrews 4:12—which solidified for me the vivifying result of searching the Scriptures.

Genesis 2:7 explains how we received life: “Then the Lord God formed man of the dust from the ground, and breath into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.” Hebrews 4:12 explains that the word of God is not an inanimate object but a living entity: “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Paul then explains how the Word became a living entity: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (II Timothy 3:16). The Greek word for inspired is *theopnuesto* which literally means “God-breathed.”

*The Scripture became a living entity because God breathed into it life. Therefore all who read and study God’s word become recipients of the breath of God. I like to think of it this way: every time we study the Scriptures, God is breathing new life into us.* What an exciting thought! As we apply ourselves to the word, God’s Spirit bends over us and breathes new life into us. That’s why we teachers must break the chains. We must help students to get under the oxygen mask of God’s Word so that they may be revived by the oxygen of the Spirit. We cannot resuscitate them. Only the Spirit of God can give life to the soul.

### Conclusion

My wife and I do ministry every weekend across North America, and it is clear to us that the Bible is not in the pew and in many instances not even in the pulpit. We have witnessed, first hand, churches that have very little life. We have seen members who seem not to have the joy of the Lord nor the certain hope of salvation. But I believe the nebulous feeling about salvation can be remedied to a large degree by getting the church back into serious Bible study. I believe that two things will come about when the chains are broken and the Bible is put back in the pew.

First, many will discover a certain hope of salvation. The uncertainty of salvation is a menacing problem among many Adventists. We pastors, teachers, and administrators have done an excellent job of indoctrinating members, but we

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Great Controversy*, 599.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

have not done as good a job leading people to Christ and helping them to become diligent students of His Word. As we loose the chains and lead them into personal Bible study, they will find the Christ of Scripture.

God speaks to us in His Word. Here we have in clearer lines the revelation of His character, of His dealings with men, and the great work of redemption. Here is open before us the history of patriarchs and prophets and other holy men of old. They were men 'subject to like passions as we are.' We see how they struggled through discouragements like our own, how they fell under temptations as we have done, and yet took heart again and conquered through the grace of God: and beholding, we are encouraged in striving after righteousness. As we read of the precious experiences granted them, of the light and love and blessing it was theirs to enjoy, and of the work they wrought through the grace given them, the spirit that inspired them kindles a flame of holy emulation in our hearts, and a desire to be like them in character—like them to walk with God.<sup>4</sup>

Believers will then be convinced that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. They will understand that the Christ of Scripture saves us solely by His grace. They will see the fruitlessness of attempting to work their way to heaven and will then throw themselves in the arms of Christ, trusting Him for their complete salvation. Then joy will fill their lives. They will testify of the certainty of their salvation in their work and in their witness. We pastors, teachers, and administrators will not have to spoon feed them the Word, but they will eat goodly helpings daily because they will see Bible study as life.

And finally, as we put the Bible back in the pew, there will be revival and reformation. History testifies that once the chains of biblical illiteracy were broken during the Dark Ages and the people received the word, revival and reformation took place. I believe that this same divine phenomena will take place again as the Bible once again becomes meaningful to the rank and file of the church. Serious Bible study always revitalizes church members, and revitalization brings change. People who study the Word not only experience transformation in their life but start calling for change in the world around them—they want reformation. So we'd better get ready, because when we loose God's people in the Word, change will come. Freeing people in the Scriptures forces them to question the status quo. Breaking the chains is a call for reformation.

I want revival. I want reformation. What about you? Let's break the chains of affluence, academia, and apathy. Let's put the Bible back in the pew.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Steps to Christ*, 87–88.