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## Unchaining the Bible

Roland J. Hill

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# UNCHAINING THE BIBLE

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**Pulpit, pew, and classroom reveal a tragic biblical illiteracy,  
but reformation is only a deep breath away!**

**W**hile teaching a summer class on the Epistles of John, I discovered serious biblical illiteracy among my college students. Just after making a point by referring to Nicodemus, I was interrupted: “Who’s Nicodemus?” “Yeah, who is this guy?” Other heads nodded.

I knew the students. One had graduated from an Adventist academy, the other had attended public school until college but had grown up in the church. How could they be so uninformed about the Bible? It was as if a class of college physics majors interrupted their teacher to ask, “Who is Sir Isaac Newton?” Or if a students in a journalist ethics class professed ignorance of William Randolph Hearst!

Biblical illiteracy among Adventist believers is astounding. We see it in our Sabbath school classes. In academy and college classrooms. Ask a churchload of Adventists how many studied their Sabbath school lesson during the week—not seven times, just studied! The Bible can be found in pew book racks. In academy and college classrooms. But who is studying it? Who can honestly say it is the most important book in our home libraries?

The spiritual lethargy and illiteracy that haunts our churches and

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*\* Roland J. Hill is a counselor in Dallas, Texas. “Unchaining the Bible” is condensed from a paper he presented at the first International Jerusalem Bible Conference in June 1998.*

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schools—and indeed, to an even greater extent, our secular society—testifies that something has bound the Word and is keeping it out of the pew. Bound it as securely as during the Dark Ages, when a chain fastened to the wall of church libraries kept it from the people. And the result is the same: biblical illiteracy even in this enlightened age!

Of course, modern chains differ from the Medieval variety. I have caught sight of three: the chains of affluence, academia, and apathy. Let's examine them.

### The Chain of Affluence

The Bible communicates a liberating influence. As it is studied and its principles absorbed, many readers move up the economic ladder. But the very prosperity that testifies to the power of the Word may lead to apathy, as sustaining affluence eats up the time once used for study. Ironically, the Bible speaks of the perils of prosperity: "When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God by failing to observe his commands and his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multi-

plied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God" (Deut. 8:10-14, NIV). As the chain of affluence tightens, the tendency increases to spend less time with the Word. Affluence gives rise to self-sufficiency, and self-sufficiency moves believers to trusting more in self than in Scripture. Call it the tyranny of affluence.

### The Chain of Academia

We pastors, teachers, and academic administrators have communicated to students (subliminally and unintentionally, of course) that *studying about* the Bible is more important than *studying* the Bible, that reason ranks higher than inspiration, and that to truly understand the Bible, you need the services of a scholar. One former professor put it this way: "The teacher must always be the teacher and the student, the student." Our constant references to what the scholars say leaves the impression that they are the ultimate authority. And students leave the classroom and parishioners the church believing they cannot do serious Bible study without the support of scholars.

But "the Bible. . . was not written for the scholar alone. On the contrary, it was designed for the common people."<sup>1</sup> That's the enlightened opinion of Ellen White. It is not, however, the opinion of all scholars, as I recall being informed shortly

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after beginning my teaching career. An august scholar confronted me at my first theological society meeting with a question about my qualifications to teach New Testament on the college level. "What degree do you have?" he inquired. Rather sheepishly I admitted to having only a Doctor of Ministry degree. His intimidating reply still rings in my ears: "I thought they allowed only Ph.D.'s to teach New Testament at the college level."

The message was clear: Only scholars can really understand and teach the Bible. This chain of academic intimidation has been used not only in the classroom but also in the pulpit. We preachers dazzle the saints with our academic acrobatics. And they leave the church thinking not only what a smart preacher they have, but that they will never understand the Bible as he or she does! So why try? Let the preacher do the Bible study for us!

It's past time that we shed the chain of academia. We must point our students—whether in the class-

room or in the pew—to the Word God wrote both for them and for us, "the common people."

### **The Chain of Apathy**

Perhaps of all chains, apathy enslaves the greatest number of believers. Many have ambivalent feelings about the Bible. Yes, it's a good book, even God's Word, but what is its relevance today? There is a listlessness about sacred things in general and the Bible in particular. And then there are all the versions. How is a person to know which is best? Maybe it would be best to read none and avoid confusion. The Bible may be the world's best-seller, but it surely isn't the world's best-read. Why, even the preacher hardly opens it in the pulpit. And have you read all the different views about what it says on the Internet? Many Adventists would rather just sit in the bleachers and yawn than roll up their sleeves, go down on the field, and call balls and strikes. . . .

I see a lack of emotional attachment to the Scriptures. Even while

apologizing for not spending so much as five minutes a day with God's Word, most believers don't really look apologetic. Psychologists, with reason, are calling this the "age of indifference." God called it right: "I know your record and what you're doing; to my regret, you are neither cold or hot. Rather, you're apathetic, indifferent! So I'm going to spit you out of my mouth!" (Rev. 3:15, 16, author's paraphrase).

Apathy numbs believers, leaving them unaware of their true spiritual condition. They can't hear the rattle of chains. . . . The ministry of the Bible teacher, whether in academia or the pulpit, is "To open blind eyes, To bring out prisoners from the prison, Those who sit in darkness from the prison house" (Isa. 42:7, NKJV). The clarion call is for teachers who will break the chains, loosen the shackles, and instruct believers through the Word of God.

### How to Break Chains

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? We can pulverize these chains in three ways. First, we must

#### *Demystify the tools of Bible study*

Modern theologians have developed the concept that certain tools hold the key to understanding the Bible. We in the academic community have made believers feel that

without knowing the original languages, keeping up on archeological studies, and exercising systematic theology, one can never become a serious student of Scripture. This posture verges on promoting a mystical knowledge of the kind Paul confronted and rebuked in Corinth, which only an elitist group could perceive. (See 1 Corinthians 1:26 to 29.)

Now, no question, tools are important. They are a great help to the sincere seeker after truth. Perhaps we should teach biblical Greek to our local elders! And develop curricula in the language of lay people that cover hermeneutics, archaeology, and systematic theology. Why do we confine these tools within the walls of our educational institutions? The Internet offers a way to achieve these objectives. But let's keep in mind that tools in and of themselves do not ensure a correct interpretation of God's Word.

The second way we can shatter the chains is by

#### *Humanizing the teacher*

Yes, it's necessary. I can tell you from experience how wonderful it feels when people come to you for answers about the deep issues of the Bible, and they leave feeling they have heard from the Lord's appointed oracle. What an ego boost to have a class sitting in awe as you explore the Pauline Epistles! Before long, we're mining the ore of truth

for them instead of teaching them how to dig out jewels of truth for themselves. And they go out from our presence believing they have heard the voice of God, while we go knowing we have delivered nothing but our professional opinion.

If we are to shatter the chains of affluence, academia, and apathy, if we are to put the Bible back in the pew, we must say with Paul, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (1 Cor. 4:7, NIV). Students must leave us believing that if God can reveal truth to the teacher, He can reveal truth to them.

There's another dimension we must permit them to explore: our hearts. Our love of God must be transparent. They must see our struggles, and sometimes insecurity, about our conclusions. But the Bible must be real to us before it can be real to our students. Have we been transformed by the Word? Is it a living force in our lives? 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 life.

Finally, we can crush the chains 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, NIV). Degrees and teaching experience are only parts of the interpretive equation.

A modern Zechariah might write: "Not by Greek, nor by Hebrew, nor by scholarship, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts." Study of the Bible is unlike study of any other subject. As Ellen White put it: "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 from wresting truths difficult of comprehension."<sup>2</sup>

If Bible study were simply obtaining information, we would not need spiritual insights. But searching the Scripture is about receiving the breath of God. It's about being resuscitated daily by Christ, the Living Word.

Three texts reveal the vivifying result of searching the Scripture:

Genesis 2:7 explains how we received life. "And the Lord God formed man of the dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (KJV).

Hebrews 4:12 reveals that the Word of God is not inanimate but a living entity: "For the word of God is

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living and active. Sharper than any two-edged sword, it penetrates even to soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (NIV).

2 Timothy 3:16 reveals that the Word became a living entity: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (NKJV). The Greek word for “inspired” is *theopnuesto*, which means “God-breathed.” Scripture became a living entity because God breathed it into 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 Scripture, the Holy Spirit bends over and breathes new life into us! What an exciting insight! And how clear it becomes that Bible study must become a daily experience. Without it, we wither away spiritually. That’s where the apathy and indifference and, finally, spiritual death come in.

### Deep-Breathing the Word

My wife, Suzy, and I do ministry every weekend across North America. We have seen that the Bible is not in the pew, and often not even in the pulpit. We have visited churches that are gasping for want of the life-giving Spirit. We have met members who lack not only joy in the Lord but the certain hope of salvation. Both problems could be dealt with, I believe, by getting the church back to serious Bible study. The results to be expected are twofold:

First, many members will find assurance of salvation. It is uncertainty about their acceptance in Christ that robs them of peace and joy.

“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 our 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>3</sup>

Believers will then be convinced that they can do nothing to save themselves. They will understand that the Christ of Scripture saves solely by grace. Seeing the fruitlessness of attempting to work their way to heaven, they will throw themselves into the arms of Christ, trusting Him for their complete salvation. Then joy will fill their life. 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; rather, they will daily eat the Bread of Life.

Finally, as we put the Bible back in the pew, there will be revival and reformation. History testifies these followed when the chains of biblical illiteracy were broken during the Dark Ages. Serious Bible study always revitalizes church members. And it always brings change. People transformed by the Word start calling for change in the world around them. So we better get ready: When we loose God’s people in the Word, change will come. They will question the status quo. Breaking the chains of affluence, academia, and apathy constitutes a call for reformation.

Ready? Deep-breathe Bible truth daily and watch your church come alive! □

REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 331.

<sup>2</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Great Controversy*, pp. 599, 600.

<sup>3</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Steps to Christ*, p. 87.

