

HOW I HAVE READ AND USED THE BIBLE UNTIL NOW

Up until about five years ago I seldom read the Bible myself, other than occasionally following along with the reading in Church. I was not a “Reader” in the Services; although I attended Church regularly. My gifts, it would seem, were perceived to lie elsewhere. I did not attend Bible Study either – in part because it was not offered at a time and in a location that was convenient to me, but mostly because I thought that was only for zealots, painfully good “folks” and retired people, who seemed to develop an increasing degree of interest in God and things religious the closer they got to their own mortality.

That is, perhaps, a somewhat incongruous attitude because in other respects I was quite an active “Church” person. I have been a member of Advisory Board – indeed I was its Chair – a Treasurer, a People’s Warden, a Lay Delegate to Synod and a Planned Giving Officer for the Diocese of Niagara. I have also been on the Board of the King-Bay Chaplaincy, and have attended its version of Cursillo (Discovery). Moreover, I was a regular member of a 4th Day Group. Despite all of this, I never did read the Bible on any kind of a systematic or regular basis, or participate in any organized Bible Study.

I did not regard the Bible as something of contemporary relevance – particularly the Old Testament. The New Testament, of course, had meaning, but primarily because of the Christmas and Easter festivals. I believed in God, and in Jesus, but I didn’t believe that the Bible per se had much of specific relevance for me in my life.

I began to get some idea that I was wrong about this when I was introduced to the “Serendipity” series of support group materials; which are, of course, bible based. I participated in or led groups on Separation and Divorce, Grief, and Mid-Life Crisis using the Serendipity material; and found, to my astonishment, that the “Bible Track” was an easy transition from the so-called “Secular” one, and that it was both interesting and very relevant. I also began to use a compendium called “The Bible Incorporated into Your Life, Job and Business”, which I had been introduced to through “Discovery”, and found to be useful in dealing with life’s ups and downs from time to time. Still, I did not read the Bible directly, myself, on a regular basis.

What did bring me to read the Bible was not Church, or anything the Church did. Rather, it was the School of Philosophy. I have attended the Toronto School for about ten years now; in large part because I had become a “seeker” for meaning in my life, and had not found the answers to my questions in Church. The School introduced me to a broad range of philosophers and philosophies, both from the West and the East. With regard to the latter, I was introduced to the Indian Scriptures – the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads – and began to appreciate the wisdom that was found there. I also began to participate in Sanskrit classes as a vehicle to understanding these scriptures better, and indeed formal Gita study. Imagine my surprise when the School of Philosophy announced morning classes based on the Gospel of John. Later, on the School’s summer Residential or retreat, Psalm 119 was the basis for 10 days of study, in some considerable depth. As a result of

these initiatives I began to view the scriptures from my own tradition – Christianity – in a new and more positive light.

Some five years ago my wife and I changed our life's focus to one of service and accepted the responsibility of helping to run a Christian Children's Home in Sri Lanka. We have been going there 4 to 5 months each year. Wanting to stay involved with the School of Philosophy, which was our spiritual focus at that time, we asked the School Leader for a Course of Study to follow during our time in Sri Lanka. To our surprise he prescribed Bible Study, and gave us a specific model to follow using the King James Bible and a Cruden's Concordance. As a result of this I discovered that the Bible did have contemporary meaning and relevance. Indeed, it whet my appetite for more, and I began to read from a so-called Common Bible, a Revised Standard Version, and was thus introduced to the Apocrypha. In particular, I "discovered" the wisdom literature – The Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus.

Moreover, in Sri Lanka I have taken on the responsibility for the children's Chapel services – morning and evening prayer - daily. As such I now have to follow a lectionary, and give short talks to the children to attempt to explain and amplify what was said, and to confirm their understanding. Throughout this process I have been struck by how appropriate the lectionary readings are at any particular time – they have an uncanny way of speaking to issues being experienced in the Homes just at that time. In order to prepare for the above, I have had to start some Bible Self-Study with the help of Barclay's Daily Study Bible, and a parallel New Testament.

I do not, at this time, declare any degree of expertise; but I am now reading and using the Bible on a regular basis.

What I expect to find, and do find, in the Bible is wisdom – knowledge about the Creator and the Creation, advice about how to live my life, and how to deal with the issues that arise within it, inspiration, support in difficult times, hope, joy – all of the things I was "seeking" in other traditions, but could not find in my own ... and it was all there, all the time, right in front of me.

As to the question of historical context, it is important to know something of the times and circumstances in which the New Testament texts were written, as indeed may also be said for the Old Testament. In matters of faith, I do not believe it to be prudent to base my "belief" in something that is demonstrably untrue. However demonstrable proof, after several thousand years, is difficult to come by. I have some considerable trepidation about only accepting what can be historically proven, as the Jesus Project would apparently have us do. There would be very little of the Bible left after all of the pruning takes place. Could any of the scriptural texts from the other great religions – the Gita, the Upanishads, the Koran – stand up to such a test? Does not being able to PROVE them make them any less valid and less meaningful? I fear that such a path leads to a secular society when mere humans, without perfect knowledge, choose to discount what they cannot prove to be true.

Brian Bartley
Trin 662030885

