

## ***Bibliolatry***

Stephen Van Kuiken  
North Congregational U.C.C.  
Columbus, OH  
October 15, 2023

*Occasionally I see a bumper sticker that reads: “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.” My response is always, “What if God didn’t say it? What if the book you take as giving you God’s words instead contains human words? ...What if we have to figure out how to live and what to believe on our own, without setting up the Bible as a false idol...?” (Introduction to *Misquoting Jesus*, Bart Ehrman)*

*So I want to invite people to a mountaintop where together we can watch the might wind, the earthquake and the fire destroy the idols of creed, scripture and church, all of which have been used to hide us from the reality of God. (The Sins of Scripture, John Shelby Spong)*

Ancient Witness: Mark 7:1-9

“The B – I – B – L – E is just the book for me. I stand alone on the Word of God, the B – I – B – L – E”

My grandmother taught me that song. Little did she know that she was planting these seeds for me to become the kind of liberal minister that would scandalize most of the churches out there.

I think I’ve shared a favorite ancient Buddhist analogy that truth is like the bright moon in the sky. Words and instruction are like a finger that is pointing to the moon. But so often we focus on the finger and miss seeing the moon. In my own Christian tradition this has been true. Often the Bible, which is meant to point us toward that reality of God in our lives, has become the focus. And we miss the moon, the actual experience of the Sacred.

And so this is what the sacred texts do at their best: *they facilitate an encounter between the soul and God.*

But often in the church we have lost sight of this. Often, when it comes to the Bible, we’ve substituted being *literal* with being *serious*, and they are not the same! In fact, literalism, I would argue, is not to take the text seriously at all. And if you stop just on the surface level of meaning you won’t experience this dialogue between God and the soul that the text is meant to facilitate.

And more than this, we have often taken the Bible, put it up on a pedestal, claimed that it is inerrant, claimed that it is perfect, and we have worshipped the Bible instead of God.

It’s ironic that the very thing that warns of the dangers of idolatry has itself become a false god. The very thing that is meant to be a witness to and an avenue to faith has become an obstacle to faith.

In his book, *The Sins of Scripture*, (I think his most radical and best one) former Episcopal bishop, John Shelby Spong (d. 2021), wrote that too often scripture has been an idol that has “been used to hide us from the reality of God.” It is vitally important that we, the church, take bibliolatry, *the idolatry of our sacred texts*, very seriously.

The thing about idols and graven images is that they remove all mystery from the world. These gods become something that we can hold, control, and manipulate.

They are particularly appealing when life seems chaotic and out of control. They offer a sense of order and comfort. They offer certitude in uncertain times. I understand the allure.

It reminds me of something William Sloane Coffin used to say: some people use the Bible the way a drunk uses a lamppost—for support rather than illumination.

Ultimately, when the Bible becomes something that is beyond reproach, something that we cannot question, then it becomes a false god that we learn to control and to support our own agendas.

I am told that Thomas Merton said it is actually dangerous to put the scriptures in the hands of those who are not sufficiently spiritually awakened because they will use it for their own egocentric purposes.

We can remember the story of the Israelites when they were wandering in the wilderness, in the desert, and losing their patience. They wanted some answers, some assurances. And Moses went up the mountain to get some insight and perspective. The text says,

*When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves to Aaron, and said to him, “Arise, make us gods.” (Exodus 32:1)*

Get up, Aaron, and make us some gods. Strange, difficult story for modern minds to grasp. Those ancient Israelites engaged in an activity that belongs, it seems, only to the ancient world, the worshipping of a golden calf, which has neither attraction nor meaning to us. But this is not just an ancient practice. Let’s look a little deeper at what the golden calf meant for ancient Israel.

First, it was familiar. The golden calf was an Egyptian god image. There is security in familiarity. This is one of the gods worshiped by the mighty Egyptians, so it must be good. Besides, everybody likes to be on a winning team. Second, this god can be controlled. It can be seen, touched, and paraded around. There is security in having a god whom you can take with you, whom you can actually see. And finally, the golden calf is of human construction, made by the hands of people. It is finite. The text is very interesting here:

*So all the people took their rings of gold which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made a molten calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” (32:2-3)*

Aaron was a popular leader, even more loved than Moses, it seems, the kind of leader that gave the people what they want. He even took the graving tool, it says, in his own hand. Later, of course, he denies this, telling Moses that the people gave him the gold, “and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.” (32:24)

The Israelites were not content merely to abandon the God who inspired and led them from oppression. They were also determined to worship these religious images as if these were the gods who had liberated them from slavery. “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the

land of Egypt!” They were substituting these finite, humanly made images for the infinite, absolute and incomprehensible God. It is much more satisfying to worship something one can see and hold than an unnamable God.

Instead of a way to help us *find* God, the Bible has often become *a substitute* for God. And it is important to say that while the Bible is very valuable in our quest for understanding, *the Bible is not God!* A philosopher (Alfred Korzybski) said, “The map is not the territory.” But we often worship the map and completely miss the territory.

Rather, *the Bible is an honest conversation between humanity and God.* And when we see it this way, it invites us into a conversation with God within our own soul. It invites us into the struggle.

We can still recognize that the Bible is unique. We can grant that the Bible is in some real sense, authoritative. But the time has come to take it from its pedestal. We need to recognize that the writers of the Bible were *just like us*; they were people with whom *we share far more in common than not.*

Bishop Spong, noted that after reading the Bible in the Sunday liturgy, many mainline churches use the phrase, “This is the word of the Lord.” And the congregation responds, “Thanks be to God.” Spong wondered out loud whether the claim for the Bible to the “Word of God,” was ever appropriate. And he arrived at a startling conclusion:

*It is quite clear to me that it is the assumption that the Bible is in any sense the “Word of God” that has given rise to what I have called, “the sins of scripture.” By “the sins of scripture” I mean those terrible texts that have been quoted throughout Christian history to justify behavior that is today universally recognized as evil.*

Sometimes people say that it’s not the Bible itself that is flawed, just the way that it is interpreted. But Spong pointed out something deeper here. He said that the Bible isn’t perfect. Even though it is divinely inspired, it is still a human product and is deeply fragmented. Listen to what he said:

*At first I convinced myself that the problem was not in the Bible itself, but in the way the Bible was used. That, however, was a defensive and ultimately dishonest response. I had to come to the place where I recognized that the Bible itself was often the enemy. Time after time, the Bible, I discovered, condemned itself with its own words.*

Images of a violent and vengeful God abound. The killing of entire cities—men, women and children. Patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, slavery, child abuse—it’s not just *interpreted* that way—it’s *in there!* But then, so is grace and love.

Richard Rohr says that he has an operative principle: *If in the text you ever see God operating at a lesser level than the most loving person you know, then you know it’s not authentic revelation.*

But this is how we need to regard the text, in a critical manner. We accept the fragmented nature of the text. We accept that it is not perfect. We enter into a dialogue with it. Rohr said,

*The contradictions are in the text itself presented to you for conflict. You’re supposed to struggle with them. It is not an answer book; it’s a conflict book.*

And so the Bible, with its humanity and imperfections, invites us into the struggle. The purpose of the Bible is not to function as an external authority—some kind of answer book. The purpose is to help lead people toward an internal experience. The text, Rohr says, reveals the problem, that everything is fragmented. And struggling with the problem becomes the solution. It brings us to an encounter with God.

Marcus Borg (d. 2015), a New Testament scholar, talked about the Bible as an “ancient conversation partner”:

*There are parts of the Bible that we will decide need not or should not be honored, either because we discern that they were relevant to ancient times but not to our own, or because we discern that they were never the will of God.*

*But critical dialogue with the Bible implies not simply that we make discerning judgments about the texts. It also means that we allow the texts to shape and judge us. As we read the Bible, we are not only to bring our critical intelligence with us, but also to listen.*

Borg was pointing out that “the Bible is a human product; it tells us how our religious ancestors saw things, not how God saw things.” And in an interview once he said,

*I would love it if every clergy person would stand up and say to their congregations: “Sometimes the Bible is wrong.” There is a taken-for-grantedness in conservative American Christian culture—and it’s there in much of Mainline Christianity today as well—that understanding the Bible is simple. And if the Bible says something is wrong, then that pretty much settles it. There are very few Christians who are willing to stand up and say, “Sometimes the Bible is wrong.” Yet, I think that’s really important for Christians to say occasionally.*

He wrote (*The God We Never Knew*),

*Secondhand religion is what we learn from others; it includes everything we learn from tradition. Firsthand religious experience is our own experience of the sacred... the spiritual function (of secondhand religion) is to mediate firsthand religious experience: to bring about an opening of the heart to the reality of the sacred all around us.*

We can see this way of interacting with the text in the life of Jesus, himself. Out reading this morning has a typical encounter between Jesus and those who were treating their Hebrew scriptures as an idol to further their own agenda. This story reflects a consistent attitude of Jesus found in many other similar encounters.

So these self-appointed guardians of the faith say, “Why do you and your disciples not live according to the tradition but eat with hands defiled?” (This was not really a question but an accusation.) So they quote to him chapter and verse, and Jesus offers a typical response by firing back a quote from the tradition, himself. Usually he will appeal to the prophets, and this time he uses Isaiah:

*This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me... They leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the human tradition.*

And then he winds up with one of the great punch lines, one of the best one-liners attributed to him:

*You also have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition!*

They hold fast to the tradition, the Torah, the scripture, but lose touch with the singular purpose and essence of God. There is no inner experience.

Paul summarized Jesus' method in his famous sentence: "The letter of the law kills, but the Spirit gives life." According to Jesus, we interpret rightly when the law—the scriptures—open up into the Spirit. *The Bible is important only if it opens our eyes, wakes us up, makes us alive to the Spirit.* This is the test of whether we are using it correctly.

And so, for example, when some Bible thumpers quoted Jesus chapter and verse about the Sabbath, how did he respond? It is not lawful, they said. It is not biblical; it is not ethical, they said, to pluck grain or to heal others on the Sabbath.

Jesus is remembered as quoting some other scripture verses back at them, and then another marvelous punch line:

*The Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath.*

One must ask, according to Jesus, how does this serve humanity? How does it foster love? How does it further what is good?

In yet another encounter with some literalists, Jesus said,

*You have neglected the weightier matters of the law (of scriptures): justice, mercy and faith.*

Ask yourself, Jesus seems to say, does my interpretation of the Bible lead me to practice justice and mercy or not?

In another episode, Jesus encourages people to remember that there is a preeminent principle, a great commandment: "Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself." This is the ultimate measure of what is sinful or not. This is Jesus' method of reading the Bible.

There was yet another encounter of people throwing Bible verses at Jesus. This time it was a passage that made divorce legal. But Jesus observed how this law was being used to hurt women, leaving them abandoned, dispossessed and vulnerable. So he says to them, "Moses only allowed divorce in the first place because of your hardness of heart." And then he abolishes divorce. He takes this Bible verse and pitches it out, a response that is understandable for the circumstances of his ancient world. Why? To protect women! New Testament scholar, William Countryman writes:

*When Scripture seems to confirm your own hardness of heart, it's wrong. Ditch it, just the way Jesus did. Conversely, when Scripture breaks your world open and makes it bigger and more loving, it is achieving its true goal.*

Bibliolatry is perhaps the great tolerated sin of the church because it makes us look so pious. I can't help but think of all those people who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. And they

are on to something, it seems to me. They see this disconnect between religion and inner experience. They see an attitude that says, "I have the Bible so I don't need inner experience." We have a fine way of keeping the tradition and rejecting the voice, the command, the call of God.

Often we have used the Bible to change and convert other people but not ourselves. Often we have treated the Bible as an end in itself; we have focused too much on the finger and missed what it is pointing to. We've missed seeing the moon; missed experiencing the reality of God.

May we allow the text continually to change us, challenge us, and converse with us.  
May we take this book not as an idol, not as means for our own egocentric ends.  
May we, on the other hand, let it make us vulnerable and open.  
And in the midst of our own fragmentation and brokenness,  
may it facilitate an encounter with a healing presence and an unconditional love.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*