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ONE

Overcoming “Bibliophobia”

In the famous cartoon *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, Charlie seeks the advice of his friend Lucy, explaining that he just doesn't feel right. Charlie listens as Lucy goes through a long list of phobias that might possibly explain Charlie's problem, including fears of responsibility, cats, staircases, the ocean, and crossing bridges. Finally, Lucy suggests that perhaps Charlie's problem is being caused by something called pantaphobia. When Lucy explains that pantaphobia is the fear of *everything*, Charlie shouts, “That's it!”

The truth is that most of us have some sort of fear. Hopefully, you do not suffer from pantaphobia, but many things about life can indeed be frightening. Two of the most common fears that people admit to are a fear of public speaking followed by a fear of death. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld points out how ironic it is that most of us have a greater fear of speaking at a funeral than we have of being the deceased person spoken of!

While surveys routinely reveal peoples' greatest fears, one fear often goes unnoticed. It is a fear that is common among

Catholics. I call it *bibliophobia*, or fear of the Bible (*biblia* = Bible; *phobia* = fear of). As Catholics, many of us were told that when it came to the idea of reading or studying the Bible, we should let Father explain it to us on Sunday. Even though Vatican II stressed the importance of becoming familiar with the Bible by reading and reflecting on the Scriptures on our own, it has been hard to shake the notion that Scripture study was something that Protestants did. As a result, many of us now feel at a loss when it comes to understanding—let alone explaining—the Bible to others. We fear the topic of the Bible coming up in conversation. We feel intimidated by many of our Protestant brothers and sisters who can quote chapter and verse. Most of all, we have no idea what to tell someone if they should ask, “Is it *true* that Noah built an ark or that Adam lived to be 930 years old or that Jonah was swallowed by a large fish?” What do we say? How do we answer such questions? What do we believe for ourselves?

“I Was Never Taught to Read the Bible-.-.”

For many of us, the Bible was a very large book kept on a shelf in the living room or dining room and used mainly as a place to record the family history. It was less a book to read than a relic to store in the house, a sacramental that reminded us of the presence of God’s word in the home. As children, many of us encountered the Bible only when we needed something heavy to flatten the wrinkles in a hastily glued school art project. Rare was the occasion that this great big book was pulled out to be read from. For one, it was too heavy. For another, it had words that sounded strange and foreign-.-. too many “thee’s” and “thou’s” for our liking. More important, many of us were simply not encouraged

to read the Bible. Some Catholics actually recall being discouraged from reading the Bible in the days before Vatican II.

Another reason Catholics shied away from the Bible was because we viewed the Bible as a Protestant thing. Suspicious of the axiom *Sola Scriptura!* (Scripture alone!) seen as a battle cry for Protestants, Catholics kept the Bible at arm’s length, trusting the church hierarchy, the nuns, and our CCD teachers to sort out the Bible messages intended for our ears. As long as we had the sacraments, church Tradition, and Father’s homily, we had little reason to sit down and read the Bible privately, let alone attempt to interpret the word of God.

The Underlying Causes of Bibliophobia

Most phobias are an exaggerated or irrational fear, dread, or aversion to any object or stimulus. In most cases, there may indeed be something to fear, but the fear becomes disproportional or irrational. Bibliophobia works in much the same way. While it is true that there are some things about the Bible that may be intimidating, many of us avoid it as though it were a swarm of bees. Let’s take a look at some of the more intimidating aspects of the Bible that may be at the root of our bibliophobia.

“It’s too long!” Most of us are accustomed to reading books that have legible print and are about 200–300 pages in length. The Bible, on the other hand, usually has very tiny print and contains anywhere between 1,000 and 2,500 pages, depending on which version we’re reading.

“It has too many names I don’t recognize.” Eldad, Medad, Meshach, Shadrach, Abednego, Zephaniah, Zechariah,

Caiaphas, Annas, etc. Who *are* these people? So-and-so begot so-and-so who begot so-and-so-.-. These names don’t ring any bells for us at first glance.

“It has too many places I’ve never heard of.” Marah, Elim, Rephidim, Shiloh, Samaria, Colossae, Thessalonica-.-. even the letter to the Philippians has nothing to do with the Philippines. Where *are* these places? It’s hard to understand a story if we don’t understand the setting.

“It uses images that don’t belong to our time and culture.” We live in an age of cell phones, the Internet, microwaves, CDs, DVDs, and HDTV. References to shekels, cubits, arks, nets, and mustard seeds often leave us scratching our heads.

“It’s not like other books.” Most books have a beginning, a middle, and an end and are divided up into chapters. The Bible has testaments, books, chapters, and verses. Most books are chronological. The Bible seems to jump around a lot.

“Some of the stories just seem incredible.” Most of us have never seen burning bushes, or parting seas, or arks, or talking serpents, or people being swallowed by large fish. It’s hard to understand these stories when we have no common frame of reference.

“You need to be a Scripture scholar to interpret the Bible.” The Bible seems to be so complex and to contain so many layers of meaning that most of us feel inept and inadequate when it comes to making biblical interpretations. Sometimes it

feels as if you need to study a whole semester of graduate theology just to understand a few passages.

“I don’t know anything about Judaism and that’s all the Old Testament talks about.” Most of us are struggling just to be good Christians. The Bible, on the other hand—especially the Old Testament (which is three-fourths of the entire Bible)—seems to require a great deal of knowledge about the Jewish faith and way of life.

“I honestly don’t know if I can stomach some of it.” Jesus talks about loving enemies, praying for persecutors, turning the other cheek, the blessings of being poor, and dying in order to live. How do we live these ideas today? Can we?

“I could never quote chapter and verse like many Protestants can!” On TV and in life, we see so many preachers, ministers, and ordinary people, most often Protestant, who can quote the Bible from memory, citing chapter and verse. Do we need to learn the Bible that way too? Many of us are not sure if we can or even want to.

Perhaps noting all of these common fears and concerns about the Bible has only confirmed your notion that the Bible is something to shy away from. On the contrary, I am just pointing out that these fears and concerns about the Bible are not yours alone. They are shared by many people, especially Catholics who have not had much Bible exposure and experience. But do not despair! Fear of the Bible can be overcome by tackling the above-mentioned fears and concerns with a commonsense understanding of the Bible, such as how it is put together and how we are to read and interpret it.

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