

SHAPED BY THE WORD (Romans 10:5-15)

The word is near you, on your lips and in your hearts.

Well, maybe not quite that near. The Bible is a perennial best seller. Look in the bedside table in just about any hotel and you'll find a Gideon Bible. The Bible has been translated into just about every language on earth. It has been revised and paraphrased. There are Protestant Bibles and Catholic Bibles, Bibles for women, Bibles for children, Bibles for recovering addicts, Bibles for everyone.

The Bible is everywhere – everywhere it seems but in the hands of readers. You might think that with so many Bibles around, people would have more than a nodding acquaintance with what's in the Bible. But poll after poll finds that the rate of biblical literacy continues to go down, down, down. In one recent poll, 10% of the respondents said that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife, 16% believed that the New Testament includes a book by the apostle Thomas, and 38% thought that both the Old and New Testaments were written just a few years after Jesus' death. These are the same people who say they not only own a Bible but read it regularly.

It seems that many people are like the Emperor Charlemagne, who slept with a copy of St. Augustine's *City of God* under his pillow in hopes that just being close would let him pick it up by osmosis. It didn't work for Charlemagne and it doesn't work today.

I grew up in a church that took the Bible literally. If Genesis says God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, then that's exactly how it happened. If Joshua says the sun stood still so the Israelites could slay more Amorites, then that's exactly what happened. If Jonah says Jonah was in the belly of a great fish for three days, then that's what happened. If Matthew says Jesus walked on water, you can count on it.

There were some advantages to that, especially when I got to college and took my first biblical studies class. I had a leg up on all my classmates from mainline churches who had never read the Bible and knew just a few of the standard Sunday school stories.

What I discovered, though, is that there is a world of difference between knowing what the Bible says and understanding what it means. If you remember, in *Tom Sawyer* Sunday school kids got prizes for memorizing Bible verses. Prodded and bribed by his cousin Mary, Tom finally managed to memorize five verses – five from the Sermon on the Mount that just happened to be the shortest five he could find. Tom learned the words but didn't have a clue what they meant. And they definitely didn't make a difference in how he lived.

Let's be honest, there are good reasons for not reading the Bible. I don't recommend that anyone read the King James Version except for the majestic language. If you want to understand what you're reading, get a modern translation.

Parts of the Bible deadly dull: the genealogies with unpronounceable names, interminable repetitive rants by the prophets, detailed instruction on how to construct the tabernacle and outfit the priests, lists of kings, dietary laws. A lot of people set out to read the Bible from cover to cover and give up somewhere in Leviticus, which the early rabbis called *Torat Kohanim* or the Priest's Manual. Reading Leviticus is about as exciting as reading an instruction manual for a product you don't even own.

Then there's the content, especially the parts that get an *R* rating for the violence. What are we supposed to make of it when God hardens Pharaoh's heart so he won't let the Israelites go and then kills all the firstborn Egyptian children because Pharaoh is hardhearted?

Frederick Buechner describes the Bible as "a disorderly collection of sixty-odd books which are often tedious, barbaric, obscure, and teem with contradictions and inconsistencies...a swarming compost of a book, an Irish stew of poetry and propaganda, law and legalism, myth and murk, history and hysteria." He has one word for anyone who sets out to read from Genesis to Revelation: beware (*Wishful Thinking*, pp. 8-9).

So why do we hang on to this book – and not only hang on to it, but treasure it?

One reason is because the Bible is about life the way it really is. There are no plaster saints in the Bible. The people we find there are at one and the same time believing and unbelieving, innocent and guilty, champions and crooks, full of hope and full of despair. They're a lot like us.

But there's more than that. Karl Barth says that reading the Bible is like looking out a window and seeing people in the street suddenly stop and look up, shading their eyes to look at something that's hidden from us by the roof. Something we can't comprehend has caught them up (*The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p. 62). The Bible was written by people who saw something that caught them up, and we're trying to read the expressions on their faces.

We hang on to the Bible because we believe that somewhere in the "Irish stew" that is the Bible the word of God is waiting to be found.

Even though the Bible is often called "the Word of God," not every word in the Bible is the word of God. When the Bible says rebellious children are to be stoned to death, is that the word of God? When the Bible says it's okay to sell a daughter into slavery, is that the word of God? When the Bible says wives are to obey their husbands, is that the word of God? When the Bible says slaves are to obey their masters, is that the word of God? When the Bible blames the Jews for killing Christ, is that the word of God? When the Bible prescribes capital punishment for homosexuals, is that the word of God?

If those examples are the word of God, then all I can say is that God seems pathetically human and shares a lot of human prejudices that we denounce. But, you see, I don't think those examples are the word of God. But if they and a lot more in the Bible aren't the word of God, then does it make sense to claim that the Bible itself *in toto* is the "Word of God"? Don't we actually insult God when we hold God accountable for some of the things the Bible says?

That's why I don't follow up a scripture reading with the familiar phrase "This is the Word of the Lord." Maybe but maybe not. It's better to preface a scripture reading with something like "Listen *for* the word of God" in whatever we're about to hear. We are always listening for God's word amid all the human words that make up the Bible. And that's a process of discerning and interpreting what God intends, not taking it literally or at face value.

Go back to Karl Barth's window analogy. If you look *at* the window, you see the streaks and the dust. But if you look *through* the window, you see the world beyond. The difference between reading the Bible literally and reading it as a book that speaks out of the depths of the past into the depths of ourselves is something like that. When the Bible is the lens we look through and not the idol we look at, then it just may become the saving Word of God.