

Why does the world still need scriptures?



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

I'm aware the title question may be shocking to some. It's almost like asking if we need apple pie or grandma any more. Pie and grandma will be fine while we consider why the world is full of ancient writings people still turn to for divine instruction.

Nashville-based Gideons International distributes almost a million and a half Bibles to hotels around the world, over half a million in the U.S. alone. That should be no surprise; they've been doing that for a long time. Whenever I stay in a hotel I open the "Bible drawer" next to the bed to see if the management is "packin' scripture." Usually they are. As someone who likes to challenge assumptions, I sometimes leave a note asking the management to consider removing those, or at least placing scriptures from all religions in the room, rather than assuming their guests are all of one faith, or even have a faith.

The huge distribution of God's Bestseller makes me curious: with every scripture of the world and all versions and translations of the Bible available anywhere at anytime on computers and smart phones, why keep printing and mass producing them? Some big hotel chains don't require management to place scriptures in rooms, but Marriott apparently requires both the Bible and the Book of Mormon in every room. Interesting. Seems to send a message there are only two options to choose from in God's Library.

I've seen Bibles and "Children's Bibles" available in the waiting rooms of medical offices. What's the reasoning? No church, no library ... no hotel, nearby?

We all know why Bibles are dropped here, there and everywhere: marketing (i.e. conversion). Or perhaps to comfort? But why can't a person of faith go directly to the Author?

After I was "saved" in my teenage years, "filled with the Spirit" and spoke in tongues, I "witnessed" (evangelized), carrying "my Bible" everywhere. I called it "my Bible" because it wasn't just "The" Bible or any Bible, it was mine – a personal love letter from God, treasured as the most special book, greater than any other book on the planet (certainly more important than my history or biology textbooks). I was completely devoted to my Bible, my Faith, my God. I was a true blue "Bible Believer."

Henry David Thoreau wrote: "Every sacred book ... has been accepted [by faith] to be the final resting-place of the sojourning soul" ("A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers"). But as Thoreau saw it, the sojourner must be traveling forward toward the truth, not delayed by camping at an oasis to read a book. A holy book is only a refreshment for the traveler on their journey. The message should not be: "Stay here and read this book," but "Take a sip to refresh yourself and move on."

In my youthful faith, I believed in God, not a book. Century after century people have been told (by self-appointed Bible experts) that they had to "believe in the Bible" but only as interpreted and preached by those experts.

It seems to me we have a new religion, which is actually a very old religion: Bookism – faith in a book; an incarnation of ink.

The Qur'an refers to "The People of the Book," speaking of Jews and Christians and their scriptures. Then, as happens fairly regularly in the history of religion, the Qur'an becomes superior to the Bible and Muslims become their own "People of the Book (Qur'an)." All book-based, scripture-centered traditions do the same thing: they venerate and elevate their book higher than all others. It is divine, essentially worshipped. Might we say God "dropped" a bestseller – the second greatest creation after human beings?

If you take away the holy book, any holy book, what would happen to the religion, the faith, the community of believers? Would faith itself dissipate, disintegrate, disappear without a book to believe in? Would God fall silent?

We were once told that the Bible is our "manual of faith"-God's instruction book. If we strayed from the words, someone would always correct us by quoting a verse from The Word to bring us back in line with the divine message. I slowly discovered something strange and disturbing to my faith: different teachers and preachers had different viewpoints and interpretations of "biblical teachings." I held my Bible tight and prayed. Then I loosened my grip to get a grip on a very old, familiar (biblical!) line: "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." Free even from The Book and believing in The Book, any book, any faith? Letting go can be liberating, even salvific.

So I leave this question on your brain's bookshelf: Does the world still need scriptures?

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chiehland.com.