

# Why Bother with the Bible?

BY BILL IRELAND

**When we dwell in the pages of the Bible, we train ourselves to see that God is always at work. By its very nature, Scripture is subversive. It confronts us with an alternative script and says, “This is the best way to live.”**

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In a recent op-ed piece in *The New York Times*, columnist Nicholas Kristof offered his readers a clever test. He presented a brief but error-filled narrative of events drawn from Scripture and church history, and asked them how many mistakes they could find in it. Here is a sample:

The Virgin Mary, a young Christian woman, conceives Jesus immaculately and gives birth to him in a Jerusalem manger. Jesus, backed by the Twelve Apostles and their wives, the Epistles, proclaims what we call the Golden Rule: “Do one to others before they do one to you.” The Romans repeatedly crucify Jesus – at Calvary, Golgotha, and other sites – but he resurrects himself each time.<sup>1</sup>

Kristoff uses the test to illustrate what he calls the “great muddling of religious knowledge” in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Many people are making up faith as they go along, putting a lot of samples from the religious cafeteria on their tray and mashing them all together. Isolated bits of Scripture get thrown into the mix. As a result of this mash-up, knowledge of the Bible is declining precipitously. “Nearly two-thirds of Americans say they believe that the Bible holds the answers to all or most of life’s basic questions,” Kristoff explains. “Yet, only one-third know that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, and 10 percent think that Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife.”<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to the Bible, even the most religiously inclined seem to be saying, “Why bother?”

Let me be clear: Scripture *does* matter, and it is worth the bother! The writer of Hebrews was dead on when he declared that “the word of God is living and active” (4:12). I believe that. Let me offer you two reasons why Scripture matters.

## **SCRIPTURE TEACHES US TO LOOK BENEATH THE SURFACE**

Bible stories invite us to acknowledge that there is always more going on than meets the eye: beneath the surface of our circumstances, the deep river of God's purpose flows.

Time and again, people discovered God working behind the scenes during difficult circumstances or revealing the hidden potential of ordinary things. Joseph, according to the stories in Genesis 37-50, had never met God as his forefathers had. Yet at every turn in his life and amidst all his ups and downs, God was at work behind the scenes to position Joseph strategically to save his people. The Apostle Paul could not understand why he was locked in a Roman jail when there were so many places he had yet to go and preach. Then he discovered that his imprisonment led to the gospel being proclaimed in ways and in places he had never imagined (Philippians 1:12-15). In his first sign in the Gospel of John, Jesus turned ordinary water into wine at a wedding. In doing this, Jesus communicated that the most ordinary things have all kinds of hidden potential. In his hands, something as common as water can become "the best of all" (John 2:1-11). In each of these examples, there is more going on at any one time than we can possibly fathom.

Has this sort of thing happened to you? Events that did not register at the time turned out to be pivotal events, real direction-changers! The passage of time gives us a vantage point from which to look back. When we do, we discover that God was up to something when we were absolutely convinced nothing important was going on.

Why bother with the Bible? When we dwell in its pages, we train ourselves to avoid taking life for granted and to recognize that God is always at work.

## **SCRIPTURE CHALLENGES THE SCRIPTS WE LIVE BY**

The explosion in communications technology has given us immediate access to a wealth of story-tellers and the many ways of life that they commend. Five hundred channels on television, radio programs designed exclusively for our demographic, magazines in print and on-line that are devoted to exclusive interests and tastes—all of these are fountains of culture from which we may drink. These story-tellers shape how we understand ourselves and the world. They offer us scripts to follow, each promising to make our lives full and rich. Here is a sampling of some of the narratives embedded in our culture today:

*Do whatever it takes to get ahead.* It is a competitive world, and the only thing that matters is winning. Do whatever you have to do—lie, cheat, or throw somebody under the bus—in order to get an edge.

*Buy stuff in order to be happy.* The things we buy create our identity—who we are and who we want other people to think we are. Things craft our brand and image. Cramming our closets full and accumulating the latest things make a statement.

*The most important thing in the world is me. I am the final arbiter in all things. What counts is how something affects me. The only thing that matters is me and mine.*

Now give a listen to some of the most profound words in the Bible:

“But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”<sup>4</sup>  
“All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”<sup>5</sup>

“Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”<sup>6</sup>

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>7</sup>

Do you hear the difference? Do you hear how much these statements go against the grain of convention? By its very nature, Scripture is subversive. Scripture confronts us with the truth about ourselves and the world we live in. Scripture gives us an alternative script and says, “This is the best way to live.”

## NOTES

1 Nicholas Kristof, “Religion for \$1000, Alex,” *The New York Times* (April 26, 2014), [www.nytimes.com/2014/04/27/opinion/sunday/kristof-religion-for-1000-alex.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/27/opinion/sunday/kristof-religion-for-1000-alex.html?_r=0) (accessed June 8, 2014).

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Matthew 19:30 // Mark 10:31; cf. Matthew 20:16 and Luke 13:30.

5 Matthew 23:12; cf. Luke 14:11 and 18:14.

6 Matthew 6:25; cf. Luke 12:22-23.

7 Leviticus 19:18; cf. Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31, Romans 13:9, Galatians 5:14, and James 2:8.



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