

Ultimate Mystery: The Disappearance of Holy Scripture from Evangelical Worship

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The Southern Baptist Convention, identified by most as the largest Protestant denomination in America, revised its confession known as *The Baptist Faith and Message* (BFM) in June of 2000. A blue-ribbon committee chaired by Adrian Rogers and including Richard Land, Chuck Kelley, Al Mohler, and Jerry Vines—among others—worked diligently to rid the 1963 revision of the old New Hampshire Confession of the neo-orthodox language that had infiltrated the document at several points. After one of the most interesting debates in Baptist history, lasting more than an hour, the convention approved the changes by a vote of better than 95% of the thousands of registered messengers. The article on the Bible is Article I and reads as follows.

I. The Scriptures

The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is himself the focus of divine revelation.²

While I commend the committee and the convention for the admirable work on the confession, one of the finest succinct confessions in history in my opinion, I fear that I cannot be so effusive about other aspects of the confession and its aftermath. Of course, to some degree most creeds and confessions, in addition to attempting to represent the perspective of the adopting body, are also inevitably contextual, responding to the needs and questions of the era. Nevertheless, the BFM is also notable for the absence of an article on worship and no mention whatever of the importance of the reading of Scripture in the assemblies of the congregations.

This rather appalling absence of a declaration about worship, and particularly the use of Scripture in worship, is not easy to explain. David Toledo, presenting a paper examining

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² Southern Baptist Convention, "The Baptist Faith and Message" (BFM 2000); accessed November 2, 2015, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>.

the growth of Calvinism in Southern Baptist circles to the Colloquium on Baptist Church Music at Baylor University, concluded in this way:

Upon examination, it appears that churches prescribing to Calvinist theology place a greater emphasis upon the reading of Scripture in worship, the teaching of theological doctrine in their music, and the role of the Senior Pastor in guiding the worship of the church. These churches appear to be effectively communicating their doctrinal distinctions to their members during the corporate worship service. This in turn appears to lead to a greater majority of their churches enthusiastically participating in corporate worship, while remaining intellectually engaged in the process.³

As a non-Calvinistic, intensely evangelistically oriented Baptist, I am not at all happy with his conclusion. The problem is that Toledo's perspective is more often right than not. Although Mohler represented the Calvinistic strand in Southern Baptist life, the vast majority on the committee that revised the document were from the more evangelistic segment, which we usually call the Sandy Creek tradition. But lest I be too hard on Southern Baptists, this event is only illustrative of a loss of the Word of God in the worship practice of many evangelicals.

For example, *The Book of Common Prayer* claims that one of the primary reasons for its existence was so that the congregations would read through most of the Bible in a year. The Preface explains the benefits of the public reading of Scripture in the early church and laments its subsequent decline:

For they so ordered the matter that all the whole Bible, or the greatest part thereof, should be read over once in the year, intending thereby that the clergy, and specially such as were ministers of the congregation, should, by often reading and meditation of God's Word, be stirred up to godliness themselves, and be more able to exhort others by wholesome doctrine, and to confute them that were adversaries to the truth. And further, that the people by daily hearing of Holy Scripture read in the Church should continually profit more and more in the knowledge of God and be the more inflamed with the love of his true religion. But these many years past this godly and decent order of the ancient fathers hath been so altered, broken, and neglected by planting in uncertain stories, legends, responds, verses, vain repetitions, commemorations, and synodals that commonly when any book of the Bible was begun, before three or four chapters were read out, all the rest are unread.⁴

By contrast, Franklin Segler and Randall Bradley complain about the status accorded Scripture in the Free Church tradition.

³ David M. Toledo, "The Growth of Calvinism among Southern Baptists in the Twenty-First Century and Its Effect upon Baptist Church Music" (paper presented at the Colloquium on Baptist Church Music at Baylor University, Waco, TX, 25 September 2009), 16-17; accessed November 2, 2015, <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/98389.pdf>.

⁴ John E. Booty, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer 1559: The Elizabethan Prayer Book* (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1976), 14-15.

The free churches boast, “We are a people of the Book,” and yet there is great neglect of the Bible. People fail to read it regularly in private; in many homes the Scriptures are rarely read. Even in public worship services, the reading of the Bible is often neglected; only a brief scriptural passage is read in an entire worship service. When the Bible is read, it is often read carelessly and hurriedly.⁵

Assuming that such analyses are accurate, how did large segments of the evangelical church find themselves in such a morass? And where is the path of recovery for a more vital and knowledgeable Christianity in the future? In the remainder of this essay I will attempt to discover some of the etiology for this malady and then venture a few elementary, yet hopefully helpful, approaches to the restoration of Scripture to its preferred standing in the congregation.

An Etiology of the Apocryphization of Holy Scripture

As you know, *apocrypha* means “hidden.” So I coined an expression to describe the strange journey of Holy Scripture to relative obscurity in evangelical churches. How could it happen that the preachers, pastors, and theologians who fought the most determinedly against the careless exercise of historical-critical methodology and the assignment of error to the Bible have proceeded to make the sacred Scriptures virtually apocryphal?

(1) Public reading of anything has been rendered difficult by a general reading deficit among the public. Universities routinely complain about the poor reading skills of students arriving from high schools, and, of course, they are seeing the best. My own experience confirms this problem in two ways. The youngsters that matriculate in our college and often even those coming from the university into our graduate program demonstrate considerably less linguistic acumen than the students I was receiving in my first presidency 40 years ago. Vocabulary is severely circumscribed, and grammar is as foreign to most of them as a red-headed American in a barber shop in China.

The second observation arises from the fact that at Southwestern we continue to have chapel three days a week. Four years ago, deeply convicted about the subject matter in this paper, we began using students to read the Scriptures publicly, and we have been reading through books of the Bible ever since. Occasionally, I am satisfied with the alacrity of the oral interpretation and once in a great while I am ecstatic. Yet as often as not, I want to punch the fellow next to me and ask, “Who died?” I hold no animosity toward any of these sweet kids because I know that they are victims themselves. But I do declare that some of them can read about the fall of the walls of Jericho in such a manner that one prays to be taken out in the collapse.

(2) Fantasy games on phones and computers have created a serious inability among our people to reason and to imagine. Virtual reality is just what it claims to be.

⁵ Franklin M. Segler and Randall Bradley, *Christian Worship: Its Theology and Practice*, 3rd ed. (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 129.

Shooting enemy soldiers in the comparative safety of an armchair in one's bedroom has as much to do with the reality of stomach-wrenching fear as bullets whiz by and shells explode around you as riding a virtual bull has to do with a four-legged bovine in a real rodeo arena. When the capacity to reason is jettisoned and the imagination is blunted, how can a person successfully live in the text, experiencing the diachronic leap necessary to grasp the drama and message of the text?

(3) Performance-based worship has increasingly strangled participatory involvement or redefined participation as "listening." I am not here to be a critic of contemporary music. As I never tire of reminding my older pastor friends, there was a day when "The Old Rugged Cross" was a contemporary hymn. But the movement from choirs to "praise teams" and from orchestras to a couple of guitars and a percussionist in a cage is not a grand march toward using the talents and gifts of all in worship. And standing for all hymns does not fully satisfy my criteria for anything other than aching feet. I recently asked a precocious 15-year-old standing next to me, "Son, why do you folks stand through all the songs? That is difficult for me since I have to keep standing while I preach." Looking somewhat disdainful, he said, "You have to do something. You can't sing the songs." But my real point is that churches have too often moved to performance mode rather than worship mode. The elusive standard needs to include participation in meaningful ways for all, and extending hands to heaven while walling the eyes into the back of the head and attempting to look pious has little to do with participatory worship.

(4) Evangelical fascination with definition and declaration has become a substitute for an actual embracing of the words and ways of God. I just wish that I had \$50 for every document I have been asked to enhance with my signature over the last 15 years. Southwestern would now be as wealthy as Harvard. I do not deny some value to such documents. After all, Luther was able to generate more than the average excitement with the document that he nailed to the door in Wittenberg. I simply want to venture the suggestion that getting our people into the Word of God to the point that they begin seeing things as God sees them might be a better use of our time.

In his rather profound monograph, *Worship in Song: A Biblical Approach to Music and Worship*, Scott Aniol observes, "Indeed, anyone who claims to hold to the sufficiency of Scripture for faith and practice must be willing to apply the Bible's principles to every situation whether or not that situation is explicitly addressed in the pages of the Bible. To fail to do so is to deny the profitability of the Word of God."⁶ A corollary of Aniol's point is that if one is serious about the sufficiency of Scripture, the public reading of the Word must be advanced to primary importance.

(5) Entertainment has replaced thoughtful meditation as the art of the church. Now please do not misunderstand. I think it is a sin to be boring. There is no inherent evil in making things interesting. Yet unlike the world, that is not the object of the worship of the church. And, on top of that, the church really cannot compete with the world in the arena of

⁶ Scott Aniol, *Worship in Song: A Biblical Approach to Music and Worship* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 2009), 21.

entertainment. She has neither the money nor the reason to do so. But what the church has that the world knows nothing about is the Word of God, the gifts of the Spirit, and the presence of the crucified Christ.

(6) Finally, while multiple translations of the Bible, in some ways, are desirable, this endeavor has engendered havoc in the memorization and the public reading of Scripture. We now boast of everything from the Cotton Patch Version of the New Testament to the Jerusalem Bible. Who can blame our people for being confused? They not only have no idea what to read privately, but if the Scripture is to be read publicly, unless they read from the screen, they will often be as lost as the sheriff's guard searching for Robin Hood in Nottingham Forest. Memorization? Forget it. No one has any idea what version with which to invest his time. Besides, tomorrow there may be a new translation that you like better. The public reading of Scripture is only one thing that suffers.

Proposed Solutions

These perspectives provide little more than a cursory view of the problem. However, while much more could be said, the solution is more important than an analysis of the problem. Therefore, I offer beginning thoughts for a way forward.

(1) Evangelicals must recapture the confidence that God actually speaks through his Word. The soft sciences, particularly psychology, seem to have persuaded evangelicals that sophisticated answers to life's problems, which were unavailable to the race prior to Sigmund Freud, are now the psychosomatic solutions we covet. The public reading of the Scriptures as well as text-driven preaching will continue to languish until congregants embrace the solutions embodied in the Bible. In discussing the similarities and dissimilarities between the religion of Israel and other nations of antiquity, Scott Aniol concludes that the confidence of the Jews in the reliability of the Old Testament revelation sets Israel apart from the nations.

The secular (and higher critical) views over-emphasize the similarities between biblical worship and that of the ANE [ancient Near East] while ignoring the overwhelming differences. Most starkly, these views fail to recognize the fundamental contrast between the worldview of ancient Israel and that of other nations. Positing the historical accuracy of the Old Testament and God as Creator and Revealer provides the most satisfying explanation for the evidence. All nations had a common ancestry in Adam, and God's self-revelation was part of their heritage, thus accounting for any similarities in worship practice that exist.⁷

This same kind of confidence in Scripture should characterize evangelicals today and set them apart from the unbelieving world.

⁷ Scott Aniol, "Worldview Bias and the Origin of Hebrew Worship, *Answers Research Journal* 8 (2015): 358. Also available at https://assets.answersingenesis.org/doc/articles/pdf-versions/arj/v8/worldview_bias_Hebrew_worship.pdf (358).

(2) The churches must develop a cadre of persons who labor publicly to read Scripture well. By reading well I do not intend to advocate the theatrical, but I do insist that the reading of Scripture be done with pathos. In his monumental work, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, Hughes Oliphant Old notes this: “The main drift of the lectionary is clear. It is a serious attempt to guarantee the reading of the whole Bible through in the course of a year in such a way that the literary integrity of the different books is respected and the context of each passage is evident.”⁸ Likewise, those who publicly read Scripture must do so in a way that respects the literary and contextual integrity of the text.

(3) People must be taught that hearing the voice of the Lord in Scripture is just as much a part of worship as singing, praying, or preaching. In my own life I have reached the point where often I receive more instruction from the public reading of the Bible than from the preaching that differs rather substantially in the consistency of insight provided. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that hearing from Scripture alone is essential for godly worship. The preacher needs to be as accurate in his assessment of Scripture as possible; but he, being human, will certainly err. The Scriptures read aloud represent the unfiltered voice of God.

In *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, Christopher Ellis takes note of this perspective among early Baptists in Great Britain.

Born out of the “radical reformation” in which the Bible was placed in the hands of all Christians, Baptist spirituality needs to be understood within the polarity of scripture and experience. The reading of scripture has been the source of Baptist worship practices but is also central to the content of worship. In particular, preaching has tended to dominate the other elements of worship, and even the most famous Baptist preacher, C. H. Spurgeon (1834–1892), urged his students not to demote the rest of the service in favor of the sermon. The dominance displays both a desire for instruction in the faith and a concern to proclaim the gospel challenge so that new people may come to faith.⁹

(4) In order to speak adequately to life’s problems and their solutions, the tandem of the reading of the Word and the explanation of the Word in preaching must be magnified. In a sense, I recognize that this is a restatement of the previous suggestion, but I do so to focus on the two assignments together. “Worship” seems too often defined as “music.” While music is invaluable to the effective worship of God, to think of worship in this way misses the critical role of hearing the Word of God (Rom 10:17). It also runs the risk of inverting the pyramid and suggesting that what we say (or sing) to God is more important than what he says to us.

Perhaps I can be forgiven at this point in taking issue with the designation “worship leader” for the minister of music. If he is a “minister” and music is his medium, he is certainly

⁸ Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 4, *The Age of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 157.

⁹ Christopher Ellis, “Baptists in Britain,” in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 570.

“a worship leader” but not to the exclusion of those who read Scripture, pray publicly, or preach. The risk in identifying the one who leads music as “the minister of worship” is that this gets translated to many as meaning that “singing” is worship—then comes the preaching.

(5) Preachers need to discover that the essence of productive homiletics is found in assisting people by helping them to read the Word of God. This is the simplest definition I know for biblical preaching. My loftiest experiences in worship occur when something arises from the exposition of Scripture, searching my heart in a fresh fashion, convicting my soul, enlarging my understanding of God, or creating a widened perspective on the grace of Christ. Such happenings should not be novel in preaching but rather the fulfillment of reasonable expectation. While such wonderful moments often arise in preaching, just as often they are the product of public reading of Scripture.

(6) Vocalists, choirs, praise teams, and instrumentalists must be asked to focus on the clear development of biblical themes and lyrics. How many times have you heard a well-meaning vocalist say, “Do not listen to the music. Just focus on the words.” Then why not simply read the words? No, the music adds an artistic and beautiful context to enhance the reception of the word, and great music serves that function perfectly. When the musical form obscures the biblical message, whether that form is classical, rock, country, or gospel, then the selection or the artist or both need to be excluded from the program of future worship. This conclusion is not to deny a place for music as a magnificent art form to be appreciated for its grasp of the beautiful, but it is to say that worship demands more.

(7) Even public prayer, while certainly the sincere expression of the heart to God, should be bathed in scriptural concepts and led frequently by leaders familiar with the texts of Scripture. For an introduction to biblically informed prayer, have a convicting look at Alexander Maclaren’s *Pulpit Prayers*. Consider only the beginning prayer laced with allusions and citations from Scripture. Then compare this with prayers you commonly hear today.

O Lord! Our Light and our Salvation, help us, we beseech Thee, to enter into, and abide in, the secret place of the Most High; and may the shadow of the Almighty be our covering defence [*sic*]. Help each of us to set our love upon Thee, to bring thoughts and affections and purposes to Thyself, and to think as Thou dost teach us, to love as Thou hast loved us, to do and will as Thou dost command us, and so may we live in union with Thyself, and our word-worship in this place be in harmony with our consecration of life in our daily work.¹⁰

American evangelicals cannot endure the biblical illiteracy being spawned by the failure to read publicly and frequently the Word of God. An orthodox statement of creed or confession is important but is no substitute for hearing the voice of God. In the hearing of the

¹⁰ Alexander Maclaren, *Pulpit Prayers* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), 1.

Word, issues are addressed that no preacher would ever think to address. The sickness of the souls of our people would be healed, and the answer to responding to the culture will be discovered. God would be honored and Christ exalted. This use of Scripture in worship will require patience since our people have seldom been nurtured in this discipline. May God grant it to be so.