

## STOP WORSHIPPING THIS BOOK!

I can still feel the shock wave that raced across the classroom when that poor Bible slammed against that ancient chalkboard. Oh, I can hear it too. That dull, violent thud still reverberates through my imagination. But in that moment, witnessing the pages of that sacred book explode like an unholy mushroom cloud rattled my soul far more than my eardrums.

I wasn't the only one desperately trying to make sense of the scene that had just unfolded before me. I could see the same horror pulsating across the classroom in the eyes of my equally stunned classmates. As we sat there bewildered and afraid, trying to process the violence we had just witnessed, our collective silence became claustrophobic.

I had sat down at my desk only a moment before the chaos. It was the first day of *Introduction to Old Testament Theology*. My shiny new Dell Latitude laptop wasn't even open yet, and it would still be several hours before Windows 95 finished booting up. But my professor—a living saint who I had always assumed would stop and apologize to an ant if he came too close to stepping on it—had suddenly transformed into the very embodiment of evil before my eyes. With a flash I could

only assume were the flames of hell rising up to empower his maleficence, he had snatched his Bible off the lectern, given it a passing, almost condescending glance, and like a bat out of hell spun around and hurled it against the chalkboard where it smashed my childlike faith to pieces before falling pathetically to the ground in a heap of ruffled pages and cracked leather.

We, a classroom full of students conditioned since birth to believe the book crumbled on the ground before us was in fact God enfleshed in paper and ink, sat there motionless, bracing ourselves for the divine wrath we were sure would soon follow. We prayed for God's holy lightning to only strike our professor, sparing the rest of us who had most certainly not signed up for the blasphemous scene in which we now found ourselves held hostage.

As he surveyed our ashen and aghast faces, our professor raised his voice and declared in a firm and unambiguous voice, "Stop worshipping this book!"

Say what now?

In the excruciating quiet that continued to fill the room you could hear the nervous rattling of our souls as we tried to process what we had just witnessed. We had no time for new instructions. We were too busy sneaking glances at one another, silently conspiring to never speak of this day ever again, while nervously waiting for the dean to march through the door at any moment and fire our professor on the spot. When the dean failed to appear, we prayed fervently that Jesus would return to rapture our innocent earthly vessels from this hellscape of blasphemy and disrespect.

Now you may find yourself just as confused reading through this scene as I was experiencing it, but for radically different reasons. If so, what you have to understand is just how revered the Bible is in the sort of conservative, sometimes

fundamentalist brand of American evangelicalism I grew up in. I don't just mean the Bible as an abstract concept. I mean the literal paper, ink, and binding. "It's the word of God!" we were told. Like so many of my peers, I stood in awe of its holiness. It took me years of faithful Sunday school attendance simply to find the courage to highlight verses in my Bible because drawing in my Bible felt like scribbling on the face of God. The idea of placing anything on top of my Bible—or any other Bible for that matter—felt akin to blasphemy. This was, I believed, the very presence of God on earth. Tossing it nonchalantly on the couch or leaving it underneath a pile of junk mail felt sinful.

Even when I reached the ripe old age of middle school and finally worked up the courage to highlight verses in my Bible, the wellspring of that courage was anything but noble. I would have told you I was highlighting my favorite verses so I could find them faster and therefore be better prepared to share them “in season and out” with sinners who needed my theological tutelage. In truth, I started highlighting verses in my Bible because I saw others doing it who seemed like they loved and adored the Bible more than me and I wanted people to know I was the better Christian.

Tragically, that sanctified graffiti was the opening of the floodgates of biblical desecration. Like the juvenile delinquents whose souls I had hoped to save from hell, I quickly progressed from highlighting Bible verses to more hardcore biblical vandalism. And before you could say *Melchizedek* my beloved *WOW 1997 Student Bible* was so covered in stickers and Jesus graffiti it looked like it was one fairy godmother away from springing to life and passing out W.W.J.D. (What Would Jesus Do) bracelets at a Newsboys concert.

If you’re not familiar with *WOW*, it’s because you had better taste in music as a teenager than I did. *WOW* was a 20

soundtrack collection of the year’s top contemporary Christian music songs. It was modeled on, well let’s be honest, completely ripped off from, the *Now That’s What I Call Music* series. The *WOW Bible* was another way to milk the cash cow of faith. Excuse me, I mean extend the worship experience. I had purchased my *WOW 1997 Student Bible* with my own money, a rare accomplishment in my teenage years, and treated it like it was destined for the Smithsonian. That is, until my existential need for others to see how much I loved the Bible took over, thus beginning my fall into the sort of biblical hooliganism I would have had myself burned at the stake for just a few years earlier.

I proceeded cautiously, only a few verses highlighted here and there to test God’s patience. Not being struck down by lightning was a sign I could press on. The highlighted verses were soon followed by stickers. Lots and lots of stickers. Mostly Christian band stickers so people would know that not only did I read my Bible all the time, but when I wasn’t reading my Bible I was listening to the Bible put to music. I also made sure to squeeze in a few “Jesus Is My Lifeguard”-type stickers so people knew I was clever and funny and someone you would definitely want to invite to a party, even though I would never go to that party because going to parties was a sin.

But then one day tragedy struck. The spine of my *WOW 97 Bible* began to crack. At first I mourned what seemed like the loss of my greatest source of pride. Then I remembered I’m from the South, and in the South we can fix anything and everything with duct tape. So my otherwise light blue *WOW 97 Bible* became an otherwise light blue *WOW 97 Bible* with a distinctive gray duct-taped spine. I realize that may seem a bit sad to you, or perhaps like I was being a cheapskate, but 21

in my mind it made me feel like an even better Christian than I already thought I was.

Now you might be thinking to yourself, “But if you were willing to put stickers and duct tape on your Bible, didn’t that mean it had dropped a few levels of reverence in your mind?” Absolutely not. First of all, I was an evangelical teenager on fire for God. Things like logic and reason were irrelevant, if not sinful. More importantly, church camp was coming up that summer and true Christians don’t go to church camp without their Bible.

The year I took my duct tape bound *WOW 97 Bible* with me to church camp, one of the camp leaders happened to sit down next to me before service and noticed the condition it was in. Rather than making an unfunny youth pastor joke about my apparent inability to take care of the things I owned, he remarked about how obvious it was that I loved and read my Bible by the fact that it was held together by duct tape. My face beamed with so much pride I was like Moses coming down from Sinai after communing with God. No longer was my Bible just a Bible. It was my way of showing the rest of the world I was a better Christian than they were. After all, I read my Bible so much it had to be held together by duct tape. And where was theirs? Probably sitting on a shelf somewhere collecting dust under a pile of old church bulletins they never even bothered to read.

So that first day in *Introduction to Old Testament Theology* as I stared at my professor’s Bible lying helplessly on the ground and let his edict ramble through my brain, I genuinely struggled to make sense of

what I had just witnessed. *What was he thinking? Didn't he know this was the word of God? Did he want to burn in hell forever?* Surely that was a stunt Bible he threw against the chalkboard, some other book he 22

put a fake Bible cover on so his soul would not be damned for eternity. But if it wasn't a stunt Bible and he really was the kind of faithful, Jesus-loving, God-fearing, Bible-adoring Christian I thought he was up until that very moment, had I somehow not understood the Bible the way I thought I had? But how could that be when I had never missed a day of Sunday school and had a shelf full of Bible quizzing trophies at home to prove my biblical expertise? Worse, if I stayed in this class and listened to what he had to say would I turn out like my professor and find myself on the path to hell? Or worse still, would I become . . . a liberal?

Years later, when I was out on my own working as a youth pastor, long after I thought I had given up the idolatry my professor warned me about, I still found myself struggling with his prophetic act. I tried recreating it for the students in my youth group, thinking such a provocative stunt would have the same jarring and transformative effect on them that it once had on me, but I failed to be the edgy youth pastor I imagined in my dreams. The best I could do was drop it gently on the ground, and as your imagination will tell you, gently dropping a Bible on the ground isn't nearly as impactful as seeing one slammed against the wall. I was long past worrying about stacking something on top of my Bible, but biblical idolatry still had a firm hold on me.

When I say biblical idolatry I don't mean I was bowing down before the Bible in my bedroom every night before bed chanting and burning incense. That would be weird. And even though I was definitely a weird kid, I wasn't *that* weird. But I was radically, irrationally, cultishly devoted to a book. Not just its message, but its physical existence. The cardboard cover now covered in stickers. The pages drenched in highlights. The red letters. Even the glue that bound page to cover. 23

All of it was holier than angels' wings and even further beyond questioning than my grandmother telling me I couldn't leave the dinner table until I tried at least one bite of the new recipe she made for Sunday dinner.

Look, I get it. Idolatry is not a word or concept that has much resonance to the modern ear, but it's something all of us practice at one point or another in one way or another. That's because idolatry isn't about little golden statues hidden in the jungle awaiting the arrival of Indiana Jones. In the context of the Christian faith, idolatry is a matter of life and death. Not because capital punishment is involved, but because idolatry is about where we turn or who we turn to or what we rely on to make it through life.

If we believe God is the source of all life, then unquestioned, misguided, unhealthy devotion to anything else is deadly. Not because it kills the body—though it could—but because it destroys the soul. Idolatry is about the things we devote our lives to that aren't God, and there are many options for that in life. Whether it is work, money, fame, or some other obsession, if it becomes the center of our life, disordering and disrupting our relationships, bleeding our souls dry of joy and denying us the abundant life we've been created for, then we have likely fallen into idolatry because we've cut ourselves off from the real source of hope and joy and life itself.

So how can letting the Bible lead your life be idolatry? Therein lies the problem. Behind a question like that is a subtle but problematic assumption that the Bible and God are interchangeable, that they are one and the same; to say one is to say both. But the Bible, as divinely inspired as it might be, is not God. It's a book. Or rather a collection of books. But it is not the Word, the Logos of God, the Word made flesh. The Bible is very clear that honor belongs to Jesus (John 1:1–4).24

But when we treat the Bible and God as interchangeable something else happens, often without us even realizing it. Because the Bible doesn't exist on its own, and because it was written by people in a culture and time far removed from our own, it requires interpretation. So when we make God and the Bible interchangeable, what we are also doing—albeit unintentionally—is making ourselves, or rather our interpretation of the Bible, interchangeable with God. In seeking to better worship our Creator, we too often put ourselves in the place of the Creator as the source of all knowledge, of truth and life, sanctification and damnation. There may be whispers of truth in the message we proclaim, but inevitably and unavoidably when God and the Bible become interchangeable, it is *our* truth, or rather our version of the truth, that becomes the gospel. And so without ever realizing it, the God we end up worshiping, while perhaps bearing some

resemblance to the God described in the Bible, is ultimately the creation of the one staring at us in the mirror. Biblical idolatry is not just about worshiping a book, it's about worshiping ourselves.

When this happens, the Bible ceases to be a living document full of life-giving good news, and instead becomes calcified behind the walls of our limited understanding and personal biases, frozen in the rigor mortis of our interpretation, and transformed into a weapon of death to wield against our enemies. In our hands, the book of life becomes a book of death.

Whether we intend to or not, we inevitably follow our own ideas about what is right. That is what it means to practice personal judgment. The problem arises when we deny the role our own judgment plays in developing our faith, sanctifying our ideas as the unfiltered word of God, and forcing others to live the sorts of lives we believe they should. Or as we like to tell ourselves, we believe the Bible says they should.<sup>25</sup>

Ironically, this is exactly what the Bible itself warns us about when it teaches that idolatry leads to death. We tend to think about idolatry leading to death in purely physical or literal terms, in the sense that there are Old Testament laws against worshiping other gods, such as the first of the Ten Commandments. Worship one of those gods and you might be stoned to death. But death from idolatry doesn't always work that way. Deuteronomy 17 does require stoning to death for those found guilty of worshiping other gods, but most of the prohibitions against idol worship in the Old Testament don't come with that particular punishment. In Deuteronomy 4, for example, the death and destruction God warns of is being cast out from the nomadic camp the people of Israel called home and scattered into the wilderness alone. Being lost and alone in the wilderness could certainly lead to death by virtue of no longer being connected to the source of life. However, as we continue to read the story of the people of God as it unfolds in the Hebrew Bible we find that neither penalty seems to have done much to curtail the people's idolatry.

If we pay careful attention to the words of the prophets,<sup>2</sup> we'll notice the people of God were almost always worshiping other gods alongside Yahweh and yet few if any of them— outside the prophets of Baal, who had the audacity to go toe to toe with Elijah—faced the death penalty for their idolatry (1 Kings 18:40).

The sort of death that comes through idolatry is more often a spiritual death that inevitably and inescapably comes about when we cut ourselves off from the Spirit, the source of life—when we replace God with something or someone else as the source of our devotion. Idolatry leads to death because without the breath of God in our lungs, we cannot breathe. Without that sacred breath, death inevitably finds us all. When <sup>26</sup>

this inversion of the created order happens, when we make ourselves gods of our own lives but without the ability to breathe out new life, the spiritual death inside us begins to seep out, infecting others with the sort of spiritual death and damnation we heap on those we deem undeserving of the love and grace we have been gifted.

When we transform the Bible into the divine, or more accurately our interpretation of the Bible into “a biblical worldview,” we begin to focus on the story we *think* it tells, rather than the story we are being invited into. When we conclude we have the Bible figured out, we end up telling others where they belong instead of trying to figure out our own place within the story of the people of God. We begin to tell a new story of our own creation and we have become very bad storytellers. We tell stories about exclusion and damnation, oppression and misogyny, of condemnation of the poor and scapegoating the stranger, and we do it all in the name of God.

When we put bad stories in the mouth of God, we smother what the Hebrew Bible calls the *ruach* of God, the very breath of God—that is to say, the Spirit herself from blowing how and where she will and to and through whom she will. This sort of idolatry kills, sometimes physically, but always spiritually. It should come as no surprise then to see the Bible lose not just its place of authority in modern life, but also its relevance or appeal to anyone not already warming a pew on Sunday morning. After all, who would want to be part of a story that crushes your spirit with constant judgment and damnation?

We have to learn to tell a better story—even if it doesn't result in a single new person joining our membership rolls. That is, after all, what the Bible is calling us to do: continue telling the story of the people of God. Not just by memorizing <sup>27</sup>

and quoting Bible verses, but by living out that story ourselves in and for the world around us.

That invitation isn't an easy one. In fact, it's often quite painful learning that the thing you thought you knew so well you didn't really know at all. But passing through the refining fires of intellectual honesty and historical reality is an essential crucible for faith. We can't claim to be a people of the truth if we're devoted to bearing false witness for the sake of maintaining our dogmatic beliefs. Admitting we could be wrong about the things we are most convinced of, that are so fundamental to who we are, is painful and scary, because embarrassment is painful and becoming someone new is scary.

But fear not. While refinement can be painful, those tongues of fire are the Spirit of God, and the Spirit brings life. The refining of the Spirit is a necessary and purifying, and ultimately liberating, fire that prepares us for the complex, challenging, and sometimes embarrassing reality of the story of God's people. It is only from there that the scales of presupposition and dogma can begin to fall from our eyes so that we may begin to see the good news where it is, and just as importantly where it is not. It is from this biblical rebirth that we can begin to reimagine divine inspiration not as a form of heavenly dictation, but a Spirit-infused, wholly saturated way of life that begets more life. This is the indwelling of the Spirit in our lives, this inspiration, literally the in-Spirit-ing of our very being. Or as the Bible calls it, being godbreathed (2 Timothy 3:16).

Godbreathed things live and grow. They don't sit on a shelf collecting dust like that book that's sitting on your shelf right now that you swore you were going to read on the beach last summer. (You know the one.) For that growth to happen, we need to make space for the Spirit to live and move and have her way in our lives. The Holy Spirit doesn't force her way into 28

our lives. She stands waiting to be invited in. We need to make space and allow the Spirit to move in and among us, teaching us the story of the good news, but also helping us imagine new ways the good news can be understood and applied in the ever-evolving contexts of history and culture. That doesn't mean making the Bible more palatable for the prevailing culture. It means telling the same story we've been telling for two thousand years. But telling it in new and fresh ways that take into account everything we've learned over those two thousand years in order to tell our story in ways that make sense to our neighbors, that relate to their lives, that are intellectually honest, and most importantly, that are truly good news.

There are those who see any deviation from reading and understanding the Bible in the way they believe it has always been read and understood as a low view of Scripture that doesn't take it seriously. But asking hard questions about the Bible and refusing to settle for worn-out answers is not a low view of Scripture. Nor is making something relatable and practical the same as making something comfortable. Making space for the Spirit to open our eyes and transform our minds, remaking us anew each and every day, is a deeply serious and sometimes painfully honest approach to the story of our faith. More importantly, making space for the Spirit holds the Bible in a place of true reverence, giving thanks to God for the gift that has been given and the invitation that has been extended to us to join in the transformative storytelling of God's people. This sort of Spirit-led positioning resists the biblical idolatry that has for so long plagued the church, because the Bible in this dynamic no longer exists as something to exploit for our purposes. Instead it is transformed into a journey we are invited to join, learn from, and mourn over when we get it wrong. Most importantly, setting the Spirit free to guide our 29

reading of Scripture allows the Bible to be truly good news on earth as it is in heaven.

This isn't a new approach to Scripture. In fact, it's an incredibly ancient one. This sort of understanding of divine inspiration was first articulated by the earliest church fathers. And the honest wrestling and questioning of Scripture I'm suggesting? Not only is wrestling with God a practice found all throughout the Bible, but our Jewish brothers and sisters have been doing the very same for countless generations in yeshivas, where they are trained to ask questions and challenged to partner with God to develop new understandings of God's word for our ever-changing times and new contexts.

For centuries, our Christian forebears unapologetically wrestled with Scripture as well, asking hard questions of the text and delving deep to uncover the mysteries that lay beyond the literal words on the page—that is, at least until the idea of biblical inerrancy was invented in the late nineteenth century, and questioning or criticizing Scripture became a sin in fundamentalist circles.

That's not to say fundamentalists who believe in biblical inerrancy don't also evoke the language of wrestling with Scripture, but the form of wrestling with Scripture often embraced in fundamentalism is more akin to professional wrestling. Within the rigid ideological framework of fundamentalism, a reader can go through the motions of wrestling with the meaning of Scripture, but that meaning was decided long before the match ever began. Which makes a certain kind of sense, at least in that world. When right beliefs are the key to salvation, there is no room for doubt or questioning or honest exploration that sets the Spirit free to guide us where she will. All that matters is getting the answer right. And when salvation becomes a zero-sum game, we inevitably end up loving ideas more than *30*

people, particularly when those people's ideas about faith, God, and the Bible are different from our own.

When that happens—when being right is more important than loving our neighbor—we shouldn't be surprised to see people emptying the pews in droves and the church's reputation in tatters. What good news is there in a cold and lifeless answer book? Who wants to be part of a story that seems to only condemn and exclude and has little if any effect on life in the here and now? If we really love our neighbor the way we profess to love them, then shouldn't we be desperately seeking a better story to tell than the one we've been telling them? One that is overflowing with life-changing good news instead of fear-mongering and threats of damnation?

We need a more audacious faith, one that trusts the Spirit to guide us where she may. The sort of faith that isn't afraid of asking questions or knocking on doors of inquiry that have long been locked shut. We need the sort of faithful courage it takes to allow the Spirit to lead wherever she may take us as we openly, honestly, and unapologetically read and examine the text. We need to draw from our past, our present, and even from our brothers and sisters in other traditions in order to rebuild a healthier relationship with Scripture, and by extension, God and neighbor.

We need a better understanding of what the Bible is, what the Bible is not, where it comes from, and how it is inspired in order for it to play the sort of life-giving and liberating role it was always intended to play in our lives. That role and whether the Bible becomes a source of life and liberation, or is used to oppress, marginalize, or even sanctify the killing of our enemies, isn't a responsibility we can push off onto the text. It's up to us.*31*

We can't excuse away our prejudices, bigotry, misogyny, and racism with Bible verses. We must take ownership of the ways we have weaponized and abused Scripture for our own ends, repent, and rebuild a new, healthier relationship with the word of God. We must stop using the Bible to sanctify our opinions as the word of God.

We must learn to tell a good story, a life-giving story, a story worth believing in. And that won't happen until we come to terms with what the Bible really is and what it is not. As another former professor of mine once wrote, "One of the most persistent themes of the Hebrew Bible is the critique of idolatry. This applies not only to carved or molten statues, but to the human tendency to absolutize things that are merely part of the created order. Perhaps the greatest irony in the history of the Bible is that it itself has so often been treated as an idol and venerated with a reverential attitude while its message is ignored. Biblical figures from Abraham to Job do not hesitate to argue with the Almighty. The least that might be expected of readers of the Bible is that they bring the same critical spirit to bear on the biblical text."*3*