

Bible - Inspiration & Authority

Is the Bible really necessary?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

That may sound like a strange question! But in our time, the sad consensus of Evangelical church opinion is – "No."

The Evangelical church may still say it believes the Bible, but as the saying goes, "Actions speak louder than words."

According to reliable surveys, only 15% of Evangelical church members read the Bible regularly. 35% never read it at all. In thousands of churches, systematic, expository Bible preaching has given way to motivational lectures where the Bible is rarely mentioned, much less really studied. The singing of Bible-based, doctrinally-rich, instructive hymns has given way to the use of repetitious, cliché-filled songs and choruses that touch the emotions (and often dull the mind) without convicting the soul.

Not a New Problem

This kind of thinking is not a new problem. Dutch pastor Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711) encountered the same mindset in his time — just a century after the Protestant Reformation. In his classic work, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, pastor Brakel tackled the Scripture-isn't-necessary mindset head-on, from Scripture itself.

He said this: "If people neglect to retain the Word of God in mind and heart, they will begin to elevate their own intellect as their Bible." And this: "Since many persons use the Word so infrequently, they are in darkness, unsteady, tossed to and fro by all

winds of doctrine, live in sorrow, suffer from weak faith, and experience the hiding of God's countenance."

That is exactly what is happening in the Evangelical church today — and there is only one solution, which pastor Brakel states so eloquently, simply by letting God's Word speak.

Here is a quotation from his book, under the heading, "Is Scripture a Necessity?" —

The Word of God is necessary and profitable not only for beginners and little ones but also for the most advanced and spiritual believers here upon earth. It is a brook from which a lamb may drink and an ocean in which an elephant can drown. He who is of the opinion that he has advanced beyond Scripture is a fool. He gives evidence that he is ignorant of the spirituality of the Word as well as ignorant of himself. God by His omnipotence could have gathered and preserved His church and caused her to grow without the written Word. It is, however, according to the wisdom and goodness of God to care for His church in a most appropriate and steadfast manner, making His will known to her by means of a written document. In our day this is enhanced by the art of printing. Everyone can have God's Word in his home and thus be enabled daily to obtain guidance and nourishment from it. God has bound man to His Word to keep him from straying outside of its perimeter. Thus, the Word of God is necessary as well as profitable. This is evident from the following:

First, it is the only means instituted by God to faith and conversion.

Without the Word none shall believe. "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:14, 17). Apart from the Word no one can be regenerated. "Of His own will begat He us with the Word of truth" (James 1:18);

"Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever" (1 Peter 1:23).

Secondly, the Word of God is the food which nurtures the spiritual life of the converted: "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the Word, that ye may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:2). Since many persons use the Word so infrequently, they are in darkness, unsteady, tossed to and fro by all winds of doctrine, live in sorrow, suffer from weak faith, and experience the hiding of God's countenance.

Thirdly, the Word of God is the only rule whereby the condition of our hearts, thoughts, words, and deeds should be governed. "And as many as walk according to this rule" (Gal. 6:16); "To the law and to the testimony" (Isa. 8:20); "Then shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all Thy commandments" (Ps. 119:6). If people neglect to retain the Word of God in mind and heart, they will begin to elevate their own intellect as their Bible, and thus will mislead themselves and be a cause for concern to others. Such neglect will result in a sinful life as well as much backsliding. Yes, many who do not establish the Word of God as their rule of life "will seek to enter in, and shall not be able" (Luke 13:24) [i.e., a key evidence of saving faith is a sanctified life governed by the Word; unrepented backsliding is an indication of a profession of faith in Christ that was not genuine].

Fourthly, the Word of God provides a steadfast comfort. "That we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Rom. 15:4); "Unless Thy law had been my delights; for they are the rejoicing of my heart" (Ps. 119:92, 111). This comfort which originates from the Word may come while reading or hearing it or during prayer and meditation. It may originate from a text of Scripture or when the soul, while engaged in sweet exercise [i.e.,

meditating on Scripture], is directed to a text. Such comfort is generally of a much deeper and more fundamental nature, and more steadfast and durable than the comfort which the soul receives without any reflection upon the Word. One should refrain, however, from insisting upon the application of a specific text of Scripture at a specific moment of time, for such expectation will readily rob him of a sweet, spiritual frame. It is therefore desirable to read or hear the Bible read frequently so that one may have ready access to a supply of Scripture in time of need. Furthermore, while meditating, texts of Scripture may be impressed upon the heart to the comfort of the soul — yes, even during dreams. Such often occurs with passages which previously had not arrested one's attention, not even knowing where to find them in the Bible.

Fifthly, the Word is a special means for sanctification. "Sanctify them through Thy truth: Thy word is truth" (John 17:7). God's Word does not only work sanctification by means of continual exhortation by which the soul is inclined towards obedience by the very voice of God. It also works sanctification through a continual dialogue with God Himself while hearing, reading, and meditating upon His Word as the believer seeks to regulate his life by means of the Word. In addition to this the soul will be more exercised in faith and will become more established in the truth by virtue of its consistent use of God's Word. Faith then gives birth to love, and love in turn to sanctification. Yes, the soul is led further in this way into the mysteries of God's Word and perceives many matters which it previously was not able to discern. Every new acquaintance with spiritual mysteries, however, as well as each mystery itself, has a sanctifying influence. Those who are remiss in reading and lax in acquainting themselves with God's Word will be deprived to a considerable degree of these blessed fruits.

Sixthly, the Word of God is the spiritual sword which must be wielded at all times in our battle against the devil, heresies, and our flesh (Eph. 6:17); "For the Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). Those who stand ready with this sword stand firm, provide themselves protection, and are victorious over their enemies.

Seventhly, to state matters comprehensively, the Word of God is the only means whereby we can be saved. "It is the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16); "The gospel of your salvation" (Eph. 1:13); "The engrafted Word, which is able to save your soul" (James 1:21). Therefore, whoever desires salvation will esteem and acknowledge the Word of God as necessary and profitable and will be desirous for this Word.¹

Well said, pastor Brakel. When the church neglects God's Word, man's word becomes the church's authority and defines its purpose. The church soon goes off-mission and off-message, abandoning its Christ-ordained purpose. The people of the church are on a spiritual starvation diet.

Christ's church must once again become the Scripture-driven church, solidly connected to its Source of power and authority. God's inspired, inerrant Word must be the church's sole authority and infallible critic in every area of life and ministry.

References:

1. Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service: In Which Divine Truths Concerning the Covenant of Grace Are Expounded, Defended Against Opposing Parties*, Volume 1; English translation of the third Dutch edition by Bartel Elshout

(Morgan, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1992), pages 72-74. Italics are in the original.

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