

Raw Bible

by bob burns (former pastor @ Perimeter)

I am not a fish eater! An occasional tuna sandwich is okay. But as a regular part of my diet? Ugh! (Maybe it goes back to those tiny little bones in the halibut Mom served us when I was eight.) So for an avid fish hater, the idea of raw fish -- to put it mildly -- disgusting.

Now a steak! That's a different story. I might have left Omaha when I was six years old, but Nebraska's love for red meat is part of my very being. But even a beef lover like me has to think twice about an uncooked hunk of tenderloin. Steak tartar? No thank you.

Well how about raw Bible? I am talking straight stuff untouched by devotional insights, study notes or commentary explanations. Just the Bible all by itself. Sound scary?

Raw Bible

The phone rang while I was in the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on a snack of peanut butter crackers. Barely able to mumble "hello" through the crunchy crumbs, I heard the voice of a Home Fellowship Leader on the line.

"Bob," he explained, "our Home Fellowship just finished studying a book, and I thought I'd ask you for some direction in the choice of a new topic."

"How about studying another book?" I said naively. "That sounds great. What would you suggest?" he asked.

"How bout Philippians?" I commented. "It is very encouraging book. I am sure your group will enjoy it."

"No Bob," this leader went on, "I want you to suggest a book to me. You know, something like Swindoll, Stanley, Sproul or Smalley.

I thought what is wrong with the poets, prophets, Peter or Paul?" But I kept that to myself, and instead responded, "Hey, I think you guys ought to dive right into a book of the Bible together."

Silence. You would have thought I suggested a review of quantum physics.

Bible Study Phobia

"Bob, we ... er... well, don't feel comfortable studying the Bible without the help of somebody who ... well ... you know, understands it Maybe I'll just swing by the bookstore tomorrow and see what is hot on the stands."

If you think fear of Bible study is simply for new believers, think again. I remember a conversation I once had with an elder in a church I once served. An excellent communicator, this man was well known in our congregation for teaching on the comparison between Christianity and various cults. However my elder-friend now faced a dilemma and was asking me for help. "Bob," he shared a discernable quiver in his voice, "I have been asked to teach a class on a New Testament book.

"Fantastic!" I responded.

"No you don't understand," he explained. "I'm not qualified to teach the Bible. I don't know how to prepare. I don't know what material to turn to.

"Why use other material right now?" I inquired. "Choose one of the shorter books and work on it. Don't even think about referring to other's ideas until you have digested the text on your own. Then, when you teach it, the ideas will be your own.

You will be more motivated and excited about what you are teaching. You will have mined the gold yourself.

"I don't know," he muttered. "I don't feel very confident studying the Bible on my own_ When I've taught on the cults I simply read what the experts said, shared it with the class and spiced it up a bit with my own stories. But when it comes to the Bible, I really need all the help I can get from the more experienced Bible teachers."

I confess I got on my elder-friend's case. Here was a leader in the church who did not feel confident to study the Bible on his own. I was reminded of Jesus' rebuke to Nicodemus, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things?" (John 3:10) At the same time I had to recognize the guilt of my own profession. We pastors tend to project an image of intimidating professionalism which creates an aura around Bible study akin to a lawyer's review of legal briefs.

Do not get me wrong. I benefit a great deal from studying commentaries, devotional writers and other helps. But this is no substitute for personal meditation on the Bible. As a seminary professor once commented, "Read the Bible, ladies and gentlemen. It sheds great light on the commentators."

Inductive Bible Study

During my early days in the faith I did not know a thing about the intricacies of inductive study. But my youth pastor, had all of us in the Scriptures at every turn. My Bible was worn by markers and underlining and personal notes. I particularly remember a study made up solely of high school football players. Friday afternoons after practice we would make our way over to Chuck's house. I guess we were too young to know any better. We did not realize that when we approached the Bible we ought to feel inadequate, unprepared, uneducated and unable to handle the profundities of the text. We just dived right in with simple questions like, "What does it say?" "What does it mean?" and "How does it apply to my life?"

Years later my seminary hermeneutics professors would have swallowed hard at some of the interpretations and applications we came up with in that early Bible study. But we learned that the Bible was God's word to us, a "love letter" designed to teach us what we should know and how we could grow. Sure, some parts of the book are tough to understand, but that didn't stop us from study. "The better you know the Author the more you will understand His word." we were assured.

The Spiritual Diet

Martin Luther labored to translate the Bible into the language of the people. He said, "I would that all my books be destroyed so that only the sacred writings, in the Bible would be diligently read." Wycliffe, Tyndale and other translators poured out their lives in order to get the Scriptures in English. Their passion was that every man, woman, and child might have the Bible to read for himself.

Yet, today, while believers in China and Eastern Europe yearn for the written word in too many western homes, multiple Bibles collect dust on the shelf while devotional time is consumed in the predigested thoughts of some "expert." Almost every week in the newspapers of America there will be an article written by some nutritionist urging us to eat properly: plenty of whole grains, raw fruits and vegetables. It is time for us to review our spiritual diets as well.

We need a strong dose of raw Bible, chewing on it over and over until it becomes spiritual nutrition. Strong meat, but necessary if we are to grow into maturity. Just the Bible all by itself. "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your prosperous, and then you will have success." {Joshua 1:8}