

Unity and the Bible

How many of you brought your Bibles to church today? How many of you own a Bible, or at least have one at home that you borrowed from a hotel room?

In most Unity churches there is laughter. Growing up in southern Missouri you wouldn't **think** of going to church without your Bible. And you were ready to turn to read along with the preacher. Catholics, I understand, weren't Bible readers. They had rosary beads at church but no Bible. In Jewish synagogues the Torah scrolls are stored in an ark.

Most people come to Unity **from** somewhere else. Alisha and Kari, who were born into and raised in Unity, are the exceptions in our congregations. So most people come to Unity with a relationship to scripture. Even if you come from an atheist family, you have formed an opinion about holy texts. And because Unity has no dogma or creed that you are required to memorize and adhere to, maybe you are curious about what Unity's take is on the Bible. I preface our exploration by noting that not only is the world looking at what it believes about holy text, our own Movement is in some flux, so this is really just an exploration—not a declaration of something set in stone.

It is interesting that Charles and Myrtle came from different backgrounds. Myrtle was born into a very conservative Methodist family in Ohio. Given the events of last week's national conference in that denomination we have to presume that not only was she indoctrinated with the philosophy of inherited illness, she was raised with a literal interpretation of the Bible. Neal Vahle portrays her religious training as strict and probably based on a punishing God—out there. Charles, on the other hand, was born in St. Cloud Minnesota and his father was an Indian Agent. Charles claims no religious upbringing but his mindset of Pantheism (God everywhere present) would certainly be supported by exposure to Indigenous ceremonies and philosophy. So these two were studying Christian Science when Myrtle experienced her healing. While Myrtle focused on the *experience* and sharing her experience, Charles was an intellectual and focused on a concrete way to articulate and reproduce in a scientific way the healing experience. He also conducted his own meditation experiment resulting in prosperity so his experience expanded his focus beyond healing.

By the late 1800's when the Fillmores were active, the idea of "New Thought" was already being explored.

Writers like Phineas Quimby and Wallace Wattles promoted the power of the mind and the law of attraction. Writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman were taking G-O-D out of the straightjacket of the text and seeing it everywhere and within humanity. So Charles began a systematic review of the traditional Christian text, the Bible, to discern what we call a metaphysical or deeper meaning beyond and included in the literal language.

In the preface to *Mysteries of Genesis*, published in 1936, Fillmore says, "The "Five Books of Moses," of which Genesis is the first, have always been credited to Moses, but that he was the author seems doubtful in the face of the many stories of creation found in the legends and hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt, Chaldea, and other nations that are almost identical with those of Genesis. It would thus seem that Moses edited the legends of the ages and compiled them into an allegorical history of creation. As printed in English translations there is little to reconcile Genesis with creation as revealed by modern geology.

Hebrew words are composite; they contain a variety of meanings, to be determined by the context. For example the Hebrew word *yom*, translated "day" in the English Bible, means "to be hot"; that is, with reference to the heat of the day as compared with the cool of the night. The word *yom* was also used to represent a period of time, an age. It will readily be seen that the translator had a rich field of ideas from which to choose and that he could make his text historical or symbolical according to his consciousness. The Pharisees of Jesus' time were condemned by Him for teaching the letter of the Scriptures and neglecting the spirit. The same charge can be brought today against those who study the Bible as history rather than as parable and idealistic illustration of the spiritual unfoldment of man. The Bible veils in its history the march of man from innocence and ignorance to a measure of sophistication and understanding. The truths in this book will be revealed to you through your own spiritual unfoldment. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned. The spiritual revelations that you seem to get from books and teachers already existed as submerged experiences in your own soul. The essential truths have been worked out in this or previous incarnations, and when you were reminded of the buried idea it blazed forth as a light from without. So all that you are or ever will be must come from your own spiritual achievements."

So for Fillmore, the Bible was a tool to explore the spiritual unfolding and maturation process in humanity. The Bible he used and quoted was often the King James Version although it is clear that he supported Bible scholarship. The Dead Sea Scrolls discovery occurred around the time of his death. Based on new source material and a leap in Bible scholarship, we have the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible which is now our primary text.

In a pamphlet published in 2000 titled *How Unity Interprets the Bible*, written by Frank Guidici, he writes: “Unity considers the Bible to be its basic textbook for the teaching of Truth and a manual for the unfoldment of the human soul. When interpreting the Bible, we believe it is very important to understand that there is no one interpretation which can be considered universal-or applicable in all cases. We interpret the Bible according to our present understanding of Truth, and as long as we stay tuned to our own indwelling guidance, the interpretation that is right for us under our present circumstances will be revealed to us. Another important thing to remember when we are interpreting the Bible is that whatever we need to know for our spiritual growth is already prepared for us in Spirit. ***By being open and receptive to the Bible as a metaphysical instrument of God's guidance, we can avail ourselves of those truths that will fulfill our needs and bless us and all that concerns us.***”

I want to emphasize this last sentence: *By being open and receptive to the Bible as a metaphysical instrument of God's guidance, we can avail ourselves of those truths that will fulfill our needs and bless us and all that concerns us.* I have really come to believe that many things can be inserted in place of the Bible. When we are open and receptive, music, nature, poetry, story, movies and other sacred texts can be metaphysical instruments of God’s guidance and we can avail ourselves of those truths that will fulfill our needs and bless us and all that concerns us. Perhaps the most critical elements of our path to truth are our **receptivity** and our view that these things are all **instruments of the Divine** trying to connect with us. Sometimes we aren’t open.

One of the challenges in Unity is the number of people *in ministry* and in the congregations who come to Unity with deep and unhealed wounds related to traditions that have weaponized the Bible. I, personally, was blessed to hear both an angry punishing God being preached and a loving, embracing God. Add in the Pantheistic, everywhere present God I learned and I had a lot to choose from in forming my own beliefs. I heard the Bible taught literally and I rejected it. So for me, the Bible is still a rich resource of stories to teach with.

I suspect that at some level Myrtle had to have rejected parts of her early training in order to be able to hear “You are a child of God and therefore do not inherit sickness” and allow that Truth to resonate so deeply within her being.

Because no one is required to adopt any Bible interpretation approach in order to claim the Unity tradition, there are Unity ministers who will never quote the Bible or use scripture stories. Ernest Holmes was less of a Bible fan and Science of Mind churches rarely speak about the Bible. Many Unity ministers quote Eckhart Tolle, Neale Donald Walsh, Deepak Chopra and many secular writers. There is nothing wrong with that in my opinion **so long as** you can tie the power of human mind to Divine Mind. **So long as** you can connect our humanity to our divinity. When we begin to connect power to people or things disconnected from the Universe, from the One True Power, then I am curious how that is Unity. Unity teaches there are many paths to Truth, capital T, so the Bible is not the only path. For many of us, including me, it is the most familiar resource that has endured centuries with meaning still waiting to be revealed.

I have had people tell me they were leaving this church because I continued to use the Bible and they found it offensive. While I am always sad when people cease to find spiritual community here, I cannot change who I am. I quote lots of people and traditions and at my core, like our founders, the Bible is a resource for my exploration of my divinity and my spiritual maturation. I love science and we’ll talk about that next week but for me, spirituality is more than science. I love mystery and the idea that there is more than what I can explain. I still find that mystery in the familiar stories I discover in the Bible. Even though the Bible is not the only source of story and tradition, I personally am not ready to completely throw it out.

So while excluding the Bible is one trend in Unity, the opposite is also a trend—a group of people clinging to Fillmore’s teachings as the one way to teach metaphysical interpretation of the Bible. What baffles me about that is how they can reconcile Fillmore’s commitment to evolving wisdom with a tradition locked into hundred year old writings. We’re not reading the same Bible language he read. We’re to read for our own experience of interpretation so while it is interesting to go back and read some of Charles’ original stuff, I’m ok with how scripture speaks to Bishop Spong and Cynthia Bourgeault and Richard Rohr and how it speaks to me.

Charles Fillmore promoted not exchanging holiday gifts but only sending cards; he promoted sexual celibacy; left Unity campus racially segregated and referred to indigenous non-Christian people as savages. Why would we limit the evolution of our Movement by tying it to an unchanging Fillmorian writing any more than we would revert to a literal translation of the Bible?

So I hope I have made the issue of Unity and the Bible clear as mud. Charles Fillmore's metaphysical interpretation of the Bible is our heritage and our foundation. Our Unity traditions of personal divinity and responsibility and our tradition of a uniting energy of love and creativity are primarily based on the teachings and examples of the life of a man named Jesus as described in the New Testament. There are other paths to understanding our personal divinity and responsibility and to experiencing the uniting energy of love and creativity. I hope we will explore lots of paths together and that somewhere along the way you reject what doesn't work for you and you find your life is transformed by the experience of what does work for you.