

May 21, 2006

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The Worlds' Only Book

Matthew 5:17

If I was looking for a retirement location about 300 B.C., Alexandria Egypt would be high on the list. As a southern Mediterranean coastal city it was the most cosmopolitan urban area of the time, rich in culture, the arts, and technology. One of the big draws for me would have been its library. The only one of its kind in the world, it was built to hold all the scrolls or books circulating in the known world. It's estimated that at one point the library had more than a half million scrolls on its shelves comprised of up to 70 percent of all written material in existence at the time. Its dream was a noble one--to establish a place that housed all of the world's knowledge. While it may not have reached its goal, nothing since has come close to even approaching its accomplishment. When the great library burned to the ground during the time when Cleopatra was flirting with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, one can only imagine how many literary masterpieces and books containing scientific and medical knowledge were lost forever.

Thinking of all those scrolls reminded me of an analogy once used by Harry Emerson Fosdick to describe how God cares for us. *"When someone illiterate goes into a library, he can see only long rows of books, almost indistinguishable as units. But when the librarian comes, the student and lover of books, he knows each one by name. Each volume has its special associations; he knows the edition, the value, the contents, the author, the purpose. He takes down one book after another, revealing his individual appreciation of each. The more he knows, as a librarian, the less he sees books in mass; the more he knows them one by one."*¹

Fosdick, of course, is comparing the librarian to God. How the librarian handles books is how God knows and cares for us. But in our day and age we are literally reaching a point in history when like the librarian in Fosdick's example looking out over the books in mass, we know them one by one. As a matter of fact we're getting closer to a time when we'll all be librarians presiding over "the world's only book." Today we're going to think about what that means for our lives and for our faith.

Kevin Kelly is a senior editor at Wired Magazine and has written an intriguing article about the intersection of printed and electronic books via the World Wide Web, entitled "What Will Happen to Books?" *"From the days of Sumerian clay tablets till now,"* Kelly says, *"humans have published at least 32 million books, 750 articles and essays, 25 million songs, 500 million images, 500,000 movies, 3 million videos and TV shows, and 100 billion public Web pages. All this material is currently contained in all the libraries and archives of the world. If fully digitized the information with the technology we currently have would need to be*

stored in a computer the size of a small town library, but in the not too distant future all that information will fit in an iPod. When that happens, the library of all libraries will ride in your purse or wallet.”²

With hundreds if not thousands of books and other things being scanned and digitized every day it’s conceivable that we will realize the dream of the original builders of the library of Alexander and it will be much more than that. We’ll all have and only need “the world’s only book.”

The one book idea isn’t anything new. Our own faith ancestors worked to put a scattered collection of sacred writings together that eventually came to be called the Bible; a literal translation from a Greek word meaning collection or library. In the context of the time it was the world’s only book containing everything from laws to entertainment stories, to philosophical theories, to science, to recipes for cooking, to parenting, and on and on.

Before the Old Testament came into existence, for instance, some people were only familiar with the “Book of Kings” that gave a chronology of Israel’s kings along with brief descriptions of most reigns. But other people were only familiar with “Chronicles” which related much more detail and color about the lives of those kings. When the two were brought together in a new collection called the Old Testament everyone benefited. It was a revolutionary concept and a technological advance of the time.

In terms of the New Testament the same dynamic occurred. While some people were only familiar with and fiercely loyal to Mark’s account of Jesus’ life others were only familiar with and loyal to John’s story. Yet when the two merged together in what became the New Testament everyone benefited. More depth and dimension was added into people’s experience of Christ.

With the idea of the digitized easily accessible world’s only book a next level step is taken. The sacred writings of the Bible are brought together not only with other sacred writings like the Koran, but also with anything and everything ever written having to do with spirituality and religion.

In the near future calling up Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount will also include cross references with the Old Testament, the Book of Mormon, the Koran, and Confucius along with Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and Abraham Lincoln and every mention, thought, and opinion ever related about the Sermon on the Mount from books, journals, newspapers, magazines, sermons, television shows and movies. It’s a revolutionary idea that can benefit everyone. Like the librarian in Fosdick’s example we will have the ability to get to know each of them one by one.

Kelly answers the “so what” question in a way that might have helped those first resistant or overwhelmed with the idea of bringing a collection of sacred writings together into something called the Bible. He suggests four things that can happen when all the books in the world become interconnected and these four things certainly carry the potential to enhance and deepen our spiritual lives and understandings of discipleship.

1. When it comes to the world’s only book “works on the margins of popularity will find a...larger than the near zero audience they usually have now.”³ All preachers over the course of their careers will produce at least a “one hit wonder” in much the same way that musicians might create a masterpiece where everything comes together and the tune catches the public’s attention. Musical one hit wonders are different from sermons, since they are played over and over again on the radio, or hit the concert trail, and are included in Golden Oldies collections. Sermons usually pass into obscurity after they are presented and the best message of someone’s career may essentially be lost forever.

With a universal library the chances are far greater that the one message that masterfully penetrated the shroud of mystery of faith to give a brilliant clarity to the complicated journey of faith may be found and circulated by more and more people. It too, may be added to the Golden Oldies of revealing that gospel that will be played and played again for generations to come.

2. The world’s only book “will deepen our grasp of history.”⁴ If you are a “*the B-I-B-L-E, yes that’s the book for me*” person, there is no need to be threatened by the Bible and its place in history. The reason is that when you call up the Bible in the world’s only book you’ll be able to see how it has profoundly affected human thought and spiritual evolution over the last three thousand years. The Bible won’t be diluted and lost in the mountain of digitized information, but will be powerfully affirmed as a landmark document.

3. The world’s only book will also bring a new meaning to authority. “If you truly incorporate all texts – past and present, multilingual – on a particular subject, then you can have a clearer sense of what we as a civilization, a species, do know and don’t know.”⁵ In other words it will temper humility and build a greater appreciation not only between those of different faiths but to people like ourselves who hold differing views within our own faith or Christian tradition.

4. Finally, the world’s only book will bring a new infrastructure in terms of an entirely new way to serve and reach out. This may have more to do with others than with ourselves. “*The most dramatic effect of digital libraries will not be on us, the well-booked, but on the billions of people worldwide who are underserved by ordinary paper books. It is these under-booked – students in Mali, scientists in*

*Kazakhstan, elderly people in Peru – whose lives will be transformed when even the simplest unadorned version of the universal library is placed in their hands.”*⁶ This brings a whole new meaning to the charge of Jesus to “go out into the world to make disciples.” With a universal library accessible to all we can evangelize in a whole new way bringing people the message of the Gospel...the Good News.

And in all we’ve talked about, this may bring a whole new way of looking at the possibilities that come with Jesus’ words in our scripture passage. *“Don't suppose for a minute that I have come to demolish the Scriptures—either God's Law or the Prophets. I'm not here to demolish but to complete. I am going to put it all together, pull it all together in a vast panorama.”*

¹ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer* (New York: Association Press, 1925), p.50.

² Kevin Kelly, “What Will Happen to Books?,” *NYT Magazine*, May 14, 2006, p.44.

³ Ibid p. 46.

⁴ Ibid. p. 46.

⁵ Ibid p. 46.

⁶ Ibid p. 45.

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