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## ***The Book that Changes the World***

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Did you know that there are over 100 million copies of the Bible sold or given away every year. Gideons International gives away a Bible every second. The Bible is available all or in part in 2,426 languages, covering 95% of the world's population.

Of course, the Bible is not just one book, but a whole collection! There are 66 books. 39 in the Old Testament and the New Testament has 27. The Old Testament covers a sweep of history, from the creation of the world, to about 400 BC. Its books include poetry and history, prophecy and law. But they all tell the story of God's troubled relationship with his people. The New Testament covers the amazing life of Jesus, and what followed on. There are four accounts of Jesus' life, called the 'Gospels', written by those who knew Him. Then, in the book called 'Acts' there is the story of how His followers carried His message around the world. Letters to Christian groups follow, many of them written from prison. Finally, some amazing predictions about the end of the world and the start of something better.

The Bible is certainly unique. There is nothing like it anywhere in history. It was written over a period of 1600 years. Written by more than 40 authors of every sort - kings, poor people, fishermen, poets, government officials, teachers, prophets. It was also written in three languages, on three continents - Asia, Africa, and Europe. Is there any other book in daily use by millions of people, around the world, parts of which were written over 3000 years ago, yet which still speaks to us today?

There are other writings as old as this, but they are all in museums, and have no relevance to the world today! No book has ever been the subject of more continued attacks upon it than the Bible. Despite the assaults mounted upon it for millennia, it has emerged unscathed.

But do we really understand the power of this Book and why God has preserved it this long and why an ancient and often confusing collections of texts is still the most widely distributed book in human history? Do we understand that the Bible is now facing its greatest attack and that attack is not coming from atheists outside the Church – the greatest and most frightening attack on the Bible is coming from within the Church as more and more scholars each year question its accuracy, undermine its authority and draw the people of God away from this life-changing, nation-transforming, foundational text.

In our own confessional document in the Uniting Church, The Basis of Union, it states very clearly:

*The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated. When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, its message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses. The Word of God on whom salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church. The Uniting Church lays upon its members the serious duty of reading the Scriptures, commits its ministers to preach from these and to administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as effective signs of the Gospel set forth in the Scriptures.*

(Paragraph 5 BOU)

Tragically, throughout the 41 year history of the Uniting Church, there has been a steady and significant departure from that high view of Scripture and our commitment to ensuring that the life and witness of the Church is always regulated by the Bible. The level of personal Bible Study and knowledge and understanding among our members has declined rapidly over the years. The authority of the Bible in our decision-making and doctrine-setting processes has been seriously compromised. Our desire to be culturally sensitive and 'relevant' has seen so many of the exclusive claims of the Bible negated or ignored and little by little the power of the Word of God within the Scriptures has faded from view and the impact and central place of the Bible has diminished alarmingly fast in our generation.

Well this morning I'm not going to exhort you to dust off your Bibles and start reading them more. I'm not going to go on some scholar-bashing rant about the many ways the Church has sold its birth right and damaged its own foundations by departing from the orthodox Christian faith as given to us in the Scriptures. Today I just want to tell you a story ... and it's a true story ... which will remind us all just how important and how powerful that dusty old book on our shelf really is in the hands of those who understand its unique place in the world and its foundational importance in the Church which Jesus is building.

Clarence Hall was a war correspondent during World War II. In 1945 he was on the Japanese Island of Okinawa, where one of the worst battles was fought in the Pacific. A battle recently under the spotlight in the movie *Hacksaw Ridge*. It was in this period that Clarence first came upon Shimabuku, the strangest and most inspiring community he ever encountered.

Huddled beneath its groves of banyan and twisted pine trees, this remote village of about one thousand people was in the path of the American advance and so it received a severe shelling. But when an advance patrol swept up to the village compound, the soldiers stopped dead in their tracks. Barring their way were two little old men; they bowed low and began to speak. The battle-hardened sergeant, wary of tricks, held up his hand and summoned an interpreter. The interpreter listened and then shook his head. *"I don't get it. It seems that we are being welcomed as fellow Christians. One guy says he is the Mayor of the village, the other guy is the schoolmaster and that's a Bible the older one has in his hand."*

Guided by the two old men - Nakamura the Mayor and Kina the Schoolmaster - the Americans cautiously toured the compound. They had seen other Okinawan villages, mostly poor and full of despair. By contrast, however, this one shone like a diamond in a dung heap. Everywhere they were greeted with smiles and dignified bows. Proudly the two old men showed them their spotless homes, their magnificently terraced fields, fertile and neat, their storehouses and granaries, their prized sugar mill. The old men talked on, and the interpreter said, *"They've met only one American before and it was a long time ago. Because he was a Christian they assume we are, too - though they can't understand why we have come with guns."* Little by little, the incredible story of the village of Shimabuku came out.

Thirty years before, an American missionary on his way to Japan had stopped briefly at Shimabuku. He stayed just long enough to convert two people (these same two men). He taught them a couple of hymns, left them a Japanese translation of the Bible and exhorted them to live by it. They'd had no contact with any Christian before then or since. Yet during the next 30 years, guided by the Bible, they had managed to create a Christian democracy at its purest.

How did that happen? Well, picking their way through the Bible, the two converts had found not only an inspiring "Person" on whom to pattern a life and with Whom they could have a personal relationship, but they also found sound principles on which to base their whole society.

They adopted the Ten Commandments as Shimabuku's legal code and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as their guide to social conduct. In Kina's school the Bible was the main textbook; it was read daily by all students, and major passages were memorized. Nurtured on this Book, a whole generation of Shimabukans had drawn from it their ideas of human dignity and of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. The result was plain to see. Shimabuku had no jail, no brothel, no drunkenness, no divorce and there was an extremely high level of health and happiness across the whole community.

Next day, the tide of battle swept the Americans on. But a few days later, during a lull, Clarence requisitioned a jeep and went back to Shimabuku. He wandered through the manicured streets and heard the sound of singing. He followed it and came to the Mayor's house, where a curious religious service was under way. Having no knowledge of churchly forms or ritual, the people had just developed their own. There was much Bible reading, repeated in singsong fashion by the worshipers.

After singing and many prayers, voiced spontaneously by people in the crowd, there was then a discussion of community problems. With each question, Kina turned quickly to some Bible passage to find the answer. When the service was over, Clarence waited as the crowd moved out, and his driver whispered to him ... *"So this is what comes out of only a Bible and a couple of old guys who wanted to live like Jesus!"* He glanced at the bullet holes in the jeep and murmured, *"Maybe we are using the wrong kind of weapons."*

Time had dimmed the Shimabukans' memory of that first missionary; neither Kina nor Nakamura could remember his name. But they never, ever forgot his parting words. Nakamura said that as the Missionary said goodbye to them, he told them: *"Study this Book well. It will give you strong faith. And when faith is strong, everything will be strong."*

Here we are now in 21st Century Australia with Bibles gathering dust on shelves all over the nation, whilst we moan and groan about the state of our nation, the decline of the Church, our wayward youth, the rise of crime and social despair ... perhaps we need to study more villages like Shimabuka and understand that a Bible and the Holy Spirit are a powerful combination when both are unleashed in partnership in any community.

Let's continue to pray for stories like this to emerge today, not just in our journeys into the past ... and let's pray that we might trust God to do amazing things through this ancient text in our lives and our communities also. Let's pray that the Church which still claims this Book as its foundational text and the final authority in all matters of faith and practice, will once again start living under its authority and trusting God for many, many miraculous stories like this one from Shimabuku Okinawa. Amen.