

# Evangelical Devotionals and Bible Studies of *The Pilgrim's Progress*: Fidelity or Bibliolatry?

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One notable reception slice of John Bunyan's 1678 *The Pilgrim's Progress's* (2003) (PP) among contemporary evangelicals is the publication of devotionals and Bible study resources. In this article I analyze six of these resources as artefacts of reception. In doing so I ask about the character of this reception. I set this question up as a moral hermeneutical inquiry into the starkly drawn contrast of fidelity or bibliolatry, both of which terms will be explained below. I proceed by considering what parameters could determine a judgment of fidelity or bibliolatry respectively, before turning to the reception artefacts for description and analysis, which will lead to a judgment about these resources as bible study guides and devotionals appropriate for evangelical discipleship. Ultimately, I ask whether these resources appropriate the spiritual legacy of PP and so engage in willful misappropriation for ends that conflict with Bunyan and/or with Scripture. Fidelity, on the other hand, as I explore below, would accord with Bunyan and Scripture, evangelically understood. A theology that must undergird the creation of Bible study resources on non-biblical texts, and implications for their creation and use in education ministry, close the paper.

PP has proved fruitful for numerous theoretical interpretations and readings, from the Marxist, through psychoanalytic, feminist, deconstructionist, and post-colonial. When Galen Johnson, in asking about '[t]he limits of theory in reading John Bunyan,' surveys these interpretations (2000, p. 447), he takes up Bunyan's exhortation to his original readers to "Be not extream" (Bunyan, 2003, p. 155). Canvassing a range of contemporary readings of PP, some of which raise valid and interesting observations, Johnson still feels compelled to observe that deliberately choosing to discount Bunyan's theology as in some way an obstacle to rightly reading him is problematic. In other words, to set aside the biblical narrative arc of salvation and the intricate tapestry of biblical revelation attesting to the gospel of Jesus Christ as the sole mediator between God and man by whom we should be saved is to ignore the essence of the work. In what follows I will look to how contemporary evangelicals explore their convictions about the gospel and the truth of the Bible as God's word in designing studies of PP in the form not of annotated literary study guides, but precisely in the mode of small group or individual devotional Bible study resources.

A brief introduction to one of the resources can serve here to whet the appetite for the fuller descriptions and analysis to follow in the second half of the article. Cheryl Ford's 2016 discipleship course is based on her own 'faithfully retold' updating of PP (Ford, 1991, 2016). In the course booklet - over 180 pages of quotes, bible references, questions, and spaces for handwritten answers - introductory instructions are given to those working through the course individually and then to those in groups, followed by advice to everyone: to pray throughout the course, to leave time to reflect and receive the Holy Spirit's anointing and inspiration, and to find the Scripture verses used in each chapter at the end of each chapter, 'to simplify your study'. That is, the study is to be made most convenient in referring to the full text of scripture in the versions chosen by Ford. To better read Scripture is the eventual goal. So the copyright page informs us

that while the default version is the English Standard Version (ESV), Ford also uses, where indicated, the New Living Translation (NLT), the New International Version (NIV), the New King James version (NKJV), the Word English Bible (WEB), and the King James Version (KJV). The reader thus introduced, although unlikely for the first time, to the contours of evangelical Bible study, knows that multiple contemporary translations exist, even if they may have their personal preferences by custom and usage. Ford provides an 'Answer key' at the back of the booklet but suggests best progress will be made by thinking things through without consulting it, having recourse only in the event of seeking greater clarification. All this information, before the course content is examined, tells us that we are dealing with the well-worn format of small group Bible study resource common to late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century evangelical church life. But here the text for discipleship is not the Bible, or at least, not in a straight forward sense that group members might be used to. In what follows I want to ask whether in this and other uses of PP by evangelicals we have instances of misappropriation. That is, if PP is adapted into song, musical, theater, opera, graphic novel or animation, as it has been, is it a misstep to treat it like the Bible in this format of study or devotional? We turn first to the question of what faithful adaptation would look like.

### *Fidelity*

Fidelity is the easier category, in this setting, to expound theoretically in relation to devotionals and bible study guides. In order for a resource to demonstrate fidelity I am looking for a double movement. Faithfulness will be both to the text of PP and the Protestant biblical hermeneutic of salvation, broadly read, that Bunyan propounds. The resource will also need to be faithful to Scripture itself, in the way that the Bible is appealed to or referenced in discussing PP and its

import to the lives of the resource user. The word of Scripture allegorized is everywhere in the text of PP. From the book in Christian's hand, to the parchment roll with the quotation from John the Baptist of the Gospels - to 'Flee the wrath to come', to the Scroll given by the shining ones at the cross that brings Christian much comfort, and even the key of promise liberating Giant Despair's prisoners from Doubting castle. And these images are further buttressed by marginal Scripture references at every turn. No reader doubts Charles Spurgeon's famous judgment that Bunyan is 'bibline', able to bleed Bible wherever you should slice him. Further, it is central to Bunyan's own pastoral purpose in writing PP to encourage Christians and other readers to turn for wisdom and truth to the Bible. Maxine Hancock (2000) has beautifully documented the intertextual power of Bunyan's marginal scripture references and explanatory notes. She claims these marginal references consistently confront the reader with the authority of the Bible, which is more than bolstering proof-texting, 'but rather a continual referring to the narrative of the Bible as the source of meaning'. The interplay of references between the reader and the author function to recall readers to their shared 'Protestant conviction that one is not alone in approaching the sacred text, but enabled by the Holy Spirit to apprehend the Scriptural truth that is there' (Hancock, 2000, p. 85). In other words, while Christian visits the House of the Interpreter once on his journey, marginal notes throw the reader into the Spirit's path as they read Scripture all along the narrative journey of Bunyan's allegory.

It should be noted that I do not suppose that fidelity is mapped by simple one to one correspondence that could be indicated by an equation: PP incident X = Bible passage Y = application Z for contemporary readers. I recognize that faithfulness does not remove contestation as to the interpretation and application of Scripture, or indeed a spiritual classic like PP, within the body of the Christian church. But what I do presume is that a recognizable doctrinal

shape of reformational Protestantism can be identified such that evangelical fidelity will not depart from those contours, to the four reformational 'solas' of the good news of salvation in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, authorized by Scripture alone. Were the resources assessed here pointing Christians away from Scripture and to PP instead or pointing Christians to PP in order to calcify a dubious reading of Scripture as a soteriological requirement we would be broaching the territory of bibliolatry.

### *Bibliolatry*

Choosing bibliolatry as my opposing term rather than simply unfaithfulness needs a little more definition and justification. The basis lies in comments from Bunyan scholars about contemporary evangelical doctrine of scripture. The *Oxford Handbook of John Bunyan*, (Davies & Owens, 2018) informs readers that, whatever the particulars of Bunyan's account of the Bible, at least he is spared the ignominious fate of being a modern evangelical. So Alison Searle in her fine essay on 'John Bunyan and the Word' notes that '[f]or Bunyan, the Word of God was most emphatically not the subjective and volatile 'inner light' of either Quakers or any others on the more radical wing of the Puritan Revolution, but neither did his strongly held conviction that every word of the canonical Scriptures was literally inspired by God result in the bibliolatry of later conservative Christian proponents of the doctrine of inerrancy' (Searle, 2018, p. 99). If evangelical bible study participants today have a 'strongly held conviction that every word of the canonical Scriptures was literally inspired by God', as Bunyan did, does a denominational or personal adherence to 'inerrancy' render them bibliolaters in opposition to Bunyan? That is, does an assumption about how to articulate the authority of Scripture by contemporary evangelicals

makes their disposition to God's word one of idolatry, such that they worship an (their own) account of what Scripture is, rather than the God who speaks through it?

### *The Tradition of Evangelical Bible Study*

It is argued here that contemporary evangelical devotionals and bible study guides stand firmly in a continuous tradition of anglophone Protestants from the Reformation through the Puritans and onward. Hence neither of these practices is a new phenomenon. Alec Ryrie, describing the consensus practices of sixteenth century British Protestants, claims that the evidence suggests that in bible reading and prayer, '[c]orrect reading was a spiritual as well as intellectual affair. It was, in fact, almost a form of prayer. Reading and prayer in the Protestant experience, bled into one another; both were means of interacting with someone who was simultaneously present and absent.' (2013, p.275) Ryrie notes the popularity of study guides and commentaries on Scripture from the late sixteenth century, not only for individual use, but for family household prayers and use in conferencing (2013, p. 277). He even points to the occasions when Protestant conference was given not only to hearing and discussing sermons, or reading Scripture and singing Psalms, but also as book clubs for discussion of literature. Here, then, in the very early anglophone Protestant tradition we see individual devotions and group bible study, and even godly discussion of texts outside of Scripture (2013, p. 390-397). Our resources on PP have a standing in this tradition of open conversation.

### *Pilgrim's Progress Bible Studies and Devotionals - at Vanity Fair*

Below, each resource is briefly described. Comparison then entails an examination of how Scripture is appealed to in communicating the meaning and application of a key part of Bunyan's narrative. I have chosen his Vanity Fair episode. Here is a brief summary: warned of the danger ahead, and given some spiritual background to the ancient foundation of the town, Christian and Faithful enter Vanity, refusing to buy anything at the Fair, thus insulting and causing a 'hubbub' among the residents. This leads to their being caged, then dragged before a judge and jury before whom Faithful testifies, only to be found guilty and executed at the stake – martyred for his faithfulness to the way of Christ against the Devil and the world. Christian miraculously escapes.

I chose to tackle the Vanity Fair episode for two reasons. The first, relatively, mundane is that all the resources focus attention on the episode for instructive purposes. Secondly, and worth noting at greater length, is that the events at Vanity Fair give rise to a number of the appropriative readings that Johnson worries are 'extrem'. So Christopher Hill understands Vanity Fair to be illustrative of the satirical attack on the upper classes that drives the social polemic of Bunyan's mechanick preacher's prose, as well as a critique of bourgeois capitalist consumerism (1989, p. 223-226). Kirsty Milne's (2015) fascinating study of the reception history of Bunyan's Vanity Fair motif opines that the originally understood barb of Bunyan's pen was directed at political persecution and oppression so that first illustrations of the episode focus on faithful's martyrdom. She dismisses a concern about markets for the curious reason that Bunyan does not, as some critics have sought to elucidate his meaning, give explicit biblical reference to Revelation 18's condemnation of the merchants of Babylon, but rather to the vanity of Ecclesiastes 1. This literalism about the author's meaning is far from adhered to by the biblically saturated composers of the Bible studies I survey, and they are arguably closer to the biblical literacy of Bunyan and his original reader than was Milne. Nevertheless, Milne is important for the ways she

charts the difference reception contexts of this phrase 'Vanity Fair' that brings us up the present day with a lifestyle magazine for the aspiring woman.

For visual comparison I have assembled data (Table 1) indicating the explicit Bible references used by the various resources under examination. In the left-hand column are the explicit texts that Bunyan directs his readers to by marginal reference through the Vanity Fair scene, including Evangelist's framing warning discourse to Christian and Faithful. The resources are listed in the following columns. Scriptures originally indicated by Bunyan and then also referred to by the resources are in bold font, and underlined font indicates verses repeated between the resources but not explicitly referenced by Bunyan.



Table 1: Bible References for Vanity Fair episode, bold text indicates Bunyan's marginal note references re-used, underlined text indicates references repeated among authors but not given by Bunyan, set out in order of presentation in each resource.

Bunyan	Gilkerson	Wilbert	Myra	Johnson	Ford
Marginal Notes	Bible Study	Devotional	Devotional	Devotional	Bible Study
Is 40:17, Eccl 1, 2:11, 17, 1 Cor 5:10, Mt 4:8, Lk 4:5-7, 1 Cor 2:7-8, Ps 119:37, Phil 3:19-20, Prov 23:23, Heb 11:13-16, Ex 1, Dn 3, Dn 6	Mt 4:1-11, Mt 6:33 Rv 18:9-18 Gal 3:27 1 Cor 2:6-8 1 Jn 4:5-6 Ps 119:37, Col 3:1-4, Prv 23:23, 1 Pt 2:11, Rom 12:14, 20-21, Gal 5:20-21, Mt 27:18, Acts 7:9, Mk 7:5-8, Jn 4:19-24, Col 2:18-	<u>1 Jn 2:15-29</u>	1 Tm 6:6, 8-9, 10a, 11-12, 17	Eccl 1:2, 1 Cor 4:9-10, Jn 7:7, Lk 6:26, 2 Tm. 3:16	1 Pt 2:11, Jn 15:18-20, Rv 3:11, 1 Cor 9:24-27, Is 50:7, Phil 3:13-16, Mt 4:1-11, Eph 2:1-9, Mk 4:18-19, Prv 23:23, Eccl 1:2, <u>1 Jn 2:15-17</u> , Acts 9:15-16/ Acts 21-26; Mt 5:10-12, Mt 10:16-39, 2

	23, Ps 12:1-2, Rom 12:14, 20-21; 1 Cor 2:6-8, Gal 5:20-21; Col 2:18-23; Col 3:1-4; 1 Jn 4:5-6				Tm 3:10-13, 2 Thes 1:4-5, Is 57:1-2, Ps 119:19; 1 Thes 1:5
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A simple reminder of our question: Do these resources reflect fidelity or bibliolatry? Analysis will follow description.

*Gilkerson (2014): Intoxicated on Life Bible Study Guide*

Luke Gilkerson and his wife, Trisha, run an online Christian ministry called ‘Intoxicated on Life’, addressing lifestyle issues of homeschooling, parenting, diet and health from a Reformed evangelical perspective. In a post found in the Language Arts sub-category of the Homeschool simplified part of their website the reader can discover ‘Essential Lessons You and Your Teen will Learn from Pilgrim’s Progress’. The product Gilkerson guides readers to is his *Foes, Fiends & Failures. A study of the bad guys of Pilgrim’s Progress* (2014), available for purchase as a digital download. Taster snippets of what the study promises are given by setting out bullet points

describing the approach to a number of these bad characters. So, for Vanity Fair, we have this preview:

‘Lord Hate-good – This character is the judge at the courthouse next to Vanity Fair who sentences travelers to death when they violate the laws of the city. (Lesson Learned: The values of Christianity [sic] and the world are fundamentally at odds with each other, and this can lead to persecution or even death.)’<sup>1</sup>

Resource users are offered a commentary on each section of PP, followed by an ‘Explore the Scriptures’ activity requiring students to ‘look up key passages referenced in the story and write the general meaning of the passage in their own words’. The passages are numerous as the table indicates. These are followed by ‘Questions for Personal Reflection’. In keeping with their confessional stance, and personally held ‘Distinctive Convictions’ about a number of matters, of which biblical inerrancy is the first mentioned, Gilkerson is thorough in his connection of scripture to Bunyan’s tale for the purpose of a reading of Scripture, that is Bible study, that is guided by PP.<sup>2</sup>

Gilkerson’s focus on Vanity Fair leads to these interpretative questions in his study, ‘If you were on trial for your faith, would there be enough evidence to convict you, or could a case be made to create “reasonable doubt” about your allegiance to Christ?’ (2014, p. 44). Gilkerson is concerned that Vanity Fair’s enticements are subtler than Bunyan’s portrayal for his readers so that he asks ‘Why is it difficult to see ourselves as pilgrims on way to our real home?’ (2014, p. 44) The question allows for recognition of struggle while inviting orientation to correct perspective. In the same vain presumed feebleness in evangelism leads this question, ‘Faithful

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.intoxicatedonlife.com/teens-adults-read-pilgrims-progress/> (accessed 5/15/19)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.intoxicatedonlife.com/statement-of-faith/> (accessed 5/15/19)

does not seem hesitant to state the values and truths of the kingdom of God in the face of obvious opposition. Why is it difficult for us to do this?' (2014, p. 44)

*Wilbert (2017): B&H Read and Reflect with Classics*

PP is one of a number selected by B&H for their 'Read and Reflect with the Classics' series. With a matt textured, hardback cover in beige, and discrete white lettering, this materially attractive volume is marketed by its dust jacket with an invitation to '[e]ngage a classic like never before by experiencing the classic *PP* along with additional study and reflection tools', with emphasis drawn to individual components: Personal reflection questions, journaling prompts, study questions, and prayer prompts. Each of the 11 chapters into which the 'content' text is divided closes with 'Bible Study Questions', indicating a verse or passage to be consulted followed by a few open questions. This section is followed by three or four 'Personal Reflection Questions'. That is then followed by 'Prayer' of a substantial paragraph of approximately half a page, offered in the first person.

Editor, Lore Ferguson Wilbert, entitling her sixth chapter of PP, 'Christian and Faithful in the Fair and the Witness of Faithfulness' (2017, p. 121-135), does not even mention the term vanity. When she comes to offer a reflective close to the chapter her focus is on 1 John 2:15-19. She asks 'What are the 'lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life'? (Wilbert, 2017, p. 134) Then her questions ask the reader what they discern of God's promise for believers now on earth and after they die. This distinction between the present and the hereafter is telling, as worldliness is contrasted to reaching for God's promises. The framing of another question is also meant to underline and challenge, I think, the assumed reader's worldliness, 'If you were called

to die for your faith, would you? Answer honestly' (2017, p. 135). This rhetorical device probably doesn't get at the unanswerability of the question, but Wilbert backs it up with the first line of her prayer: 'Father, I think I would die for my faith; but if I'm honest, I'd also have to say there are ten thousand opportunities for me to die to myself every single day and I choose not to.' (2017, p. 135) She invites the reader inwards from the external challenge of the public Fair into the spiritual matters of the heart. At the same time her prayer invites the pray-er to not romanticize sacrifice but instead remember the millions of martyrs who have gone before, ending with a supplication for help in worshipping a gracious God.

*Myra (2018): Discovery House devotional*

Harold Myra, one-time editor of evangelical flagship magazine, Christianity Today, offers a 40 day devotional to which an updated language version of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is appended. Each devotional begins with a summary paraphrase of a passage from Bunyan's text, then offers a meditation. The publishers, Discovery House, invite readers via the book cover blurb to 'experience the spiritual classic through 40 days of daily devotion.' For each entry, Myra refers to and quotes from Scripture and his introduction points the reader to a 'List of Scriptures Cited' offered at the end of the book. In divergence from the previous two sources, Myra reads *Vanity Fair* as a critique of the complex relationship that Christians have with money in a consumer society. So, his scriptural focus goes to Paul's words to Timothy about the love of money being the root of all evil. He asks readers how they will live in an affluent society and not allow good things to become snares. Trusting God over money entails a trust that '[w]hen events seem absurd, God's Word instructs and is as precious as gold'. Myra voices for his readers the puzzles

of this area of Christian discipleship in his closing prayer, 'Lord, issues of money and materialism are often hard for me to figure out.'(Myra, 2018, p. 94)

*Johnson (2012): Gospel Folio Press devotional*

Shane Johnson is a Canadian pastor whose 52 Devotions from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress, Strength for the Journey*, is published by Gospel Folio Press, 'a non-profit operation and a registered charity to operate as a Christian Ministry supplying reliable Books and Bible Study materials to the Lord's people'.<sup>3</sup> His book is divided into said 52 one to two-page devotional reflections of seldom more than two paragraphs, all with their own titles. Some open with a quotation or small section of dialogue from *PP*, a few others begin with biblical references. Each devotional picks up a thread of Bunyan's story and offers commentary that invites, warns or celebrates with the reader as the 'we' who are being addressed. Scripture is variously dispensed, in quotation from the King James Version, or with a parenthetical reference, or a mention of a book and chapter, or an episode of Scriptural narrative.

Johnson (2012) covers the Vanity Fair episode in his devotionals 26-28 entitled respectively, 'Vanity Fair', 'In the Cage', and 'The End of Faithful'. This writer's posture is more obviously critical of rampant worldliness. He aims his devotional critique of the fair at carnivalesque nudity and alcohol consumption, everything and anything having a price for sale. The author is minded of gaming at the fair and thus treating all of life like a game of chance rather than taking it seriously. With Christian and Faithful caged, the devout reader is reminded that Christians always face

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gospelfolio.com/about-gfp/mission-statement/> (accessed 8/22/19)

public scorn. 'Though there are civil and human rights that protect us from such treatment in North America, yet the sinful heart despises us just the same, and curses us under its breath. But we can count it a joy and regard it as a privilege to suffer for Him.' (Johnson, 2012, p. 52) Faithful's martyrdom invites Johnson to ask about the mystery of the suffering of some and not others, while pointing to Hopeful, whose conversion and companionship with Christian might be laid at the door of Faithful's faithfulness unto death. If persecution is clearly a theme in Bunyan's text, Johnson locates this closer to his readers than other resources so far.

*Ford (2016): Westbow Press Bible Study Guide*

As mentioned in the introduction, Cheryl V Ford follows up her 'faithfully retold' edition of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1991, 2016), with a 'Discipleship Course'. Despite publishing both Parts I and II together as texts, this study course companion covers only Part I. Yet, Ford's is the most expansive resource aimed at church small group life. Fully titled 'The Pilgrim's Progress Discipleship Course. A Companion Study to Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*' it carries the by-line claim to be '[e]quipping modern believers for the Christian pilgrimage'. Her course is structured according to the seventeen chapters into which her retelling of PP Part I was originally divided. Each chapter study is spread generously over eight to ten pages with spaces to take notes. In sidebars a number of features are repeated in each study: a 'Progress Memory Verse', a 'Progress Tip', a 'Definition' of a term like 'Watchfulness' or 'Hypocrite', a 'Key Pilgrim's Perspective', and a 'Progress Quote from Another Pilgrim' such as Spurgeon or C S Lewis. Each study ends with 'Scriptures for Further Reflection', spaces for separate notes unconnected to answering the set questions, and the Bible verses used in this chapter set out in full. Contemporary evangelical credentials are assured as the full lyrics of Matt Redman's popular worship song "Blessed Be Your

Name” are at end of Study 11 (Ford, 2016, p 80). These features intersperse anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five comprehension questions leading readers to the text of PP, as well as application questions that point to specific Bible verses to guide the possible response as to what would be the appropriate Christian application of the truth Bunyan is illustrating.

Ford recognizes that Christians must reject worldly values (unspecified), and furthermore, is convinced, like Johnson, that persecution has already begun not only in far off countries but at home. This is indicated in the back of the booklet Leader’s answer guide to the question, ‘The pilgrims caused a commotion because they were different. Do Christians in present-day society cause a commotion, or are we largely ignored? Do you see attitudes changing? What kind of opposition do Christians face here and abroad?’ (Ford, 2016, p. 61) The answer prompt tells readers that ‘[s]ome cause a commotion by standing for truth and righteousness; many more do not. Persecution is rising in our land, and it is getting more difficult to sit on the fence as a cultural Christian. Biblical Christianity is under assault and so are its adherents. We see battles raging on many fronts, from theological to ideological to practical.’ (Ford, 2016, p. 164) In case this seems like a trigger for a particular kind of reader response to a culture war cue, irrespective of the good of searching Scripture, it is worth recording Ford’s suggested answer to the question of how Christian might today ‘Buy truth’ – ‘By doing things like reading and knowing God’s Word, persevering in faith, making integrity a priority, seeking the Spirit of Truth, refusing to compromise with the lies around us.’ (2016, p. 164) Read Christian’s conversations with Hopeful in PP and you will find the same emphases.



### *Analysis of the theological dynamics of fidelity*

With such a divergence of treatments of the same textual episode from PP, how can fidelity be found? Let us consider first the shorter hermeneutic treatments of PP in the devotionals of Wilbert, Myra, and Johnson. These seem, at first glance, to evidently fail in their faithfulness to the text and intention of PP, signaled strongly by divergence from Bunyan's chosen biblical texts. Indeed, for each of their chosen Scriptural emphases, Bunyan has much more strongly indicated passages that would warrant the commentary and texts the devotionals apply to *Vanity Fair*. This would be evidence of literary misappropriation. Wilbert's commentary on 1 John 2:15-29 better belongs in reference to Faithful's testimony to Christian of his own struggle against the enticements of an old man named Adam on Hill Difficulty. Adam offers him all three of his daughters in marriage who are named lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and pride of the flesh. Bunyan makes this explicitly clear by giving his own marginal Bible reference for this episodes. (Bunyan, 2003, p.70) Likewise, Myra's commentary on the love of money from 1 Timothy 6 would be more faithfully elicited by Christian and Hopeful's encounters with Mr By-Ends' friend Mr Mony-Love, and with Demas at Lucre Hill (Bunyan, 2003, p 99-105). The characters' names and the focus on the temptation of the silver mine at the hill makes this the most obvious faithful narrative tie in for a devotional comment such as Myra offers. By contrast, Johnson's chosen verses are never directly indicated by Bunyan, but in highlighting the hatred and opposition that Christian and Faithful encounter for their strange conduct as they do not seek worldly approval in the Fair, it could be argued that Johnson lands his focus most nearly to Bunyan's own concern to emphasize the persecution of the righteous. The hermeneutic question that follows for Johnson is whether the Christendom model of state church latitude in religion and persecution of separatist Puritans is akin to the worldliness that he is anxious about in the opposition twenty-first century Christians face from a secular world order. Because on any simple parallel this

comparison does not stand we are confronted here with Johnson, as with the previous two, with the question – is their deviation from Bunyan’s Scriptural warrant a form of spiritual misappropriation? Perhaps even a bibliolatrous deployment of a predetermined biblical barb irrespective of the Bunyan text purportedly being studied? Here the reader of the Vanity Fair episode has a responsibility in their response to the guides. Can Vanity Fair be read as a critique of materialism that contemporary Christians so need? If so, and I judge the answer to be positive, could Bunyan have used Myra’s verses? Yes. If it is read as about temptation and avoiding it, might he have appealed, with Wilbert, to 1 John 2? – Certainly. For he did, in both instances, elsewhere in his text. And if Johnson lands on a key interpretative insight about persecution in a common mind with Bunyan’s narrative drive, but with the support of Scriptural texts Bunyan does not cite, his instinct still seems faithful.

The hermeneutic question we are asking of these shorter devotionals, that applies, *inter alia*, to the longer Bible study resources, is to what extent a shared confidence in the authority of Scripture grounds analogous reading habits so as to allow the text of PP to refer a Christian back to Scripture in a way that is not question begging. By this I mean that a reader seeking to learn from Scripture ought not find dissonance in the juxtaposition of a narrative in relation to Scripture, but instead find that some recognizable element of the PP episode as she could read it has spurred the devotional choice. To this extent, faithfulness to a valid interpretation of Scripture for discipleship is here, in my judgment, more important than alignment in fidelity to Bunyan’s choice of explicit Bible references or even the likelihood of his original readers being drawn variously to concerns of materialism, temptation, or persecution with the same force or expression that our contemporary sources evidence. Discipleship in obedience to the authority

of Scripture through PP rather than in obedience to the authority of PP is what is sought for the kind of faithfulness that counts in Christian ministry.

This study of Scripture through the lens of another work requires what we might call, this time with Alison Searle, biblical imagination. Searle's 2008 study of the biblical authorization of a doctrine of imagination out of its language of the heart, and 'its relational allegiance' (p 206) to God and God's world, informs her title *The Eyes of your heart. Literary and Theological Trajectories of Imagining Biblically*, drawing directly from Ephesians 1:18. Including a chapter on Bunyan (p 59-79), and notably affirming inerrancy (p 5-11), Searle's burden is to commend imagination out of the rich textual narrative of Scripture with its mixed potency of metaphors, visions, images and allegories communicated in words. Searle would push Christians out of, and beyond Scripture, in their imagination through a theological hermeneutic shaped around the gospel of Jesus Christ that is both humbly crucified, boldly resurrection empowered, and eschatologically hopeful (p 203). 'Ultimately, the Bible insists on a definition of imagination that is relational, accountable to God and others, shaped by a desire for transcendence, and committed to that which is other in empathetic love'(p 202). It is this kind of imagination, biblically authorized, that accompanies, but cannot accomplish the spiritual transformation that remains the Holy Spirit's prerogative (p 205).

An unimaginative literalism in reading *Vanity Fair* would have contemporary readers simply checking their personal finances and budgeting on whether and how they spend their money in stores and shopping malls, succumbing to the law of ethics rather than the law of the Spirit of Christ. Worse, misconstruing *Vanity's Fair*, as several visual adaptations do, readers would be compelled to direct their pious anxiety in opposition to fast-paced attractions at theme-park

entertainment venues! Or vanity would be read as pride over appearance, so that temptation would be in the direction of self-beautification and enhancement of status among others. Rather than supposing that imagination spurred by word association in contemporary setting for Christians is biblical, greater resonance with a theological story arc is required. Both Gilkerson and Ford agree in seeing Vanity Fair as primarily an episode about persecution of faithful Christians in the public domain. Both evoke the 'on trial for your faith' question to ask study guide users if there would be 'enough evidence to convict' them of being Christians. Both reference key Scriptural passages that lead to this expectation from the New Testament.

Looking more closely at Gilkerson, and particularly Ford's more extensive Bible study resources will demonstrate what biblical imagination in action can look like, and why it too might lead to a variety of non-competitive emphases and readings. We will find that faithfulness can indeed be variform, but that bibliolatry is chaotically both monochrome and endlessly refracted. Gilkerson's biblical references are scattered among his commentary on particular section of PP that is the focus of the lesson in his guide. He invites readers, parenthetically, to make the connection between Bunyan's story and scripture, so, for example, his comment that 'The Fair is built as a distraction from seeking the kingdom first (see Matthew 6:33)', or 'Vanity Fair is modeled after Babylon (see Revelation 18:9-18).' He invites his study users to pay particular attention to the following passages, where he asks participants, in the 'Explore the Scriptures' section to '[l]ook up the Bible passages from this section of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and paraphrase them, putting their general meaning in your own words' (Gilkerson, 2014, Lesson 9, n.p.). Romans 12:14, 20-21 is a passage that Bunyan alludes to explicitly as Christian and Faithful 'bless those who curse' them. Colossians 2:18-23 and Colossians 3:1-4 emphasize the danger of disqualifying pursuit of practices aligned to 'elemental spirit of this world' while commending setting one's mind 'on

things above' having died to the world and been raised with Christ. Galatians 5:20-21 is an interrupted list of sins whose pursuit disqualifies from inheriting the kingdom of God. 1 John 4:5-6 indicates that those of the world only listen to worldliness, whereas those who know God listen to John's apostolic instruction, for the community of the church discerns the difference between 'the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error'. Likewise, 1 Corinthians 2:6-8 holds out for the spiritually mature a wisdom that is not of this world, but of God. So Gilkerson's study guide picks up on the miscommunications of the Vanity Fair episode as evidence of the stark spiritual opposition between those who belong to the Kingdom of God whose language cannot be understood (Bunyan, 2003, p 87) and those who are recognized by these pilgrims as indulging error in rejection of the kingdom and forfeiture of a celestial inheritance (Bunyan, 2003, p 94).

Gilkerson's suggested readings bring out the oppositional theme of kingdom belonging, but what is lost is any coherence in handling the verses in the contexts of the various epistles, in the flow of God's word literarily understood. The weakness of mining various Scriptures to support a flowing interpretation of enemies to Christianity in PP is that fitting Bunyan's text becomes the interpretive priority. Arguably, much more biblical contextualization is need for the intended audience of teenagers to discern the rhetorical strategies of the discourses of 1 Corinthians in comparison with 1 John, and thus be able to discern the strength of Gilkerson's study guide choices. I suggest that Romans 12, and Colossians 3 are choices most easily read in isolation and analogous to Bunyan's intentions. The other passages are less easily isolated so that they call for greater maturity in handling God's word truthfully than the guide equips its readers for. This might not be, perhaps, a straight collapse into bibliolatry, but its prospect is nearer in the presenting of scripture in proof texts beyond the explicative capacity of the study guide to properly inform its readers. So maybe this is bibliolatry as a wielding of Scripture to dazzle a young

readership where more accessible biblical support might have been given or greater commentary situated the choices made. That is, the lack of exegetical clarity behind some Scripture choices leaves the guide user in the position of accepting the allocation of verses with bafflement as talismans of authority, rather than invitations to interpretive participation.

Gilkerson's choices lay out his pastoral judgments bound up in studying the non-biblical text through quick appropriation of multiple biblical texts as support. But the hermeneutical lacunae into which study guide users might fall are not offset by any commentary or answer keys such that Scriptural interpretation is assumed to be self-evident in too simple a manner. The possibility of mis-readings of Scripture cannot be avoided in any Bible study framework, but it would seem that a study of Scripture(s) through the study of another text is more liable to that danger without sufficient caution. In Searle's terms of faithful biblical imagination, a cruciform humility is lost if users have to assert agreement without insight, this also then displaces resurrection confidence, and closing the options to a singular interpretation eliminates the charity of eschatological patience of other readings.

How then does Ford fare in this regard? With a fuller study booklet as her disposal, running to 179 pages, Ford supplies tips and guidance along with her study questions. For example, while commending bible study itself in guiding readers to interpret Christian's discoveries in the study of *Palace Beautiful*, she asks 'Do you visit the Study with other believers often enough?' Then, her 'Progress Tip' exhorts readers not to put on their spiritual armor individualistically - 'we become most effective as we team up, learning to love, trust, and rely on the Spirit's enablement together.' (Ford, 2016, p 32) From Table 1 above, the last 7 references Ford gives are simply listed as 'for Further Reflection' (Ford, 2016, p 64), pointing to sojourning on earth and enduring

persecution for the Kingdom of God – the two passages from Matthew giving substantial narrative material to ponder. The Vanity Fair study, Chapter 9, begins with the suggested Memory Verses for group participants – Revelation 3:11, and 2 Timothy 3:12. Christians are to hold firm and not let anyone steal their crown, while godly living in Christ will mean persecution. Revelation 3:11 is directly placed by Bunyan into Evangelist’s mouth as he warns Christian and Faithful of what lies ahead of them. For all that Ford draws out culture clash elements, we see that one of her initial questions frames discipleship peaceably rather than antagonistically with this opening statement: ‘We should seek to be peacemakers in this world, but it is no easy task.’ (Ford, 2016, p. 59) Furthermore, it is clear that the cost of discipleship is a key emphasis for Ford, not least by quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a sidebar at the very top of the chapter. Her question 9 asks, ‘How does Evangelist’s exhortation related to persecution counter the beliefs of some Christians about lives that are blessed?’ (Ford, 2016, p 60) Vanity Fair offers material riches and other enticements to build reputation in the world counter to the word of God. Ford leads readers away from a prosperity gospel in this question, and further underlines this in question 15, observing that ‘we should be careful that things don’t own us but rather that we own them.’ She offers Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* translation of 1 John 2:15-17 as ‘A Helpful Exhortation’ sidebar – ‘Love not the world. Don’t love the world’s ways. Don’t love the world’s goods. [...] The world as all its wanting, wanting, wanting is on the way out –[...]’ Ford, 2016, p 61) The chapter closes with another sidebar, ‘An appeal’, alerting readers to the plight of the persecuted global and domestic church, and exhorting prayer. (Ford, 2016, p 64)

Ford is deeply invested in guiding the disciples through her course, steering them to discern Scripture arightly. Greater explicit commentary framing the recommendation of apposite Bible references gives them deeper narrative context, even if her emphases on enduring persecution and withstanding temptation are similar to those inferred from the same narrative episode by

Gilkerson. As a guide, Ford's questions and her supporting exhortative materials, implicitly and explicitly, as we have seen, draw the reader into the participative good of ecclesial interpretation in prayer for the Spirit's illumination. In her appended guide for group leaders, Ford suggest the following questions for group time that builds on the individual use of the study guide preceding the group meeting: 'How is our culture like Vanity Fair? Discuss the following questions and the ramifications: Should we retreat to safety by compromising our witness? Or, should we resolve to press through in active service for Christ? Do you see examples of these positions today?' ...'How can the church be a source of strength to its members?' (Ford 2016, p 147) Users may well differ from Ford or their fellow study group members in their application of PP and Scripture to their own lived contexts, but the open format of study questions is not so bare as to leave Scriptural interpretation in the wilderness of individual hunches. In my judgment, by giving users greater guidance in commentary, Ford does not close down a variform interpretive faithfulness to Scripture, but rather makes clear her justifications which, as a marker of cruciform humility, open up the room for disagreement via the open question format. Exploration of the application of her interpretation in response to the Scriptures she adduces is then also open to greater provisionality and local discernment.

### *Conclusion, with Implications for Educational Ministry*

What is to be observed from this comparative sample of devotionals and bible studies? PP generates a diverse range of Scripturally inflected responses as the range of texts and the kind of response has been examined here. Firstly, dealing with the devotionals, it is noticeable that each author strikes out in different scriptural directions with no overlap of references, and only two



repeating a Bunyan text indicated in his marginal references. Perennial areas of struggle for the Christian life of discipleship, money, sex, and power as falling under a broad rubric of worldliness stand out. But at least for Myra and Wilbert so too does an invitation to the reader to acknowledge difficulty and self-doubt in confronting these contemporary challenges. In any case, an appeal to Scripture that sustains prayerful growth toward answers rather than simple assertion of answers is far from bibliolatry. And the diversity of texts appealed to by each devotional writer around the Vanity Fair incident also opens up a range of biblical responses rather than determining that evangelical readers of PP will only ever cite one talismanic text.

Similar themes are developed in each of the bible studies, but noticeably appealing to the support of a much greater range of Scriptural references than Bunyan gives in his text. Is this then unfaithful adaptation, or misappropriation? And furthermore, is there evidence of disturbing bibliolatry in the way these texts are structured that would fall foul of Alison Searle's critique in contrast to Bunyan's use of Scripture?

Evangelical Bible study is much less uniform in its practice than outsiders might suppose. In the interpretative task of receiving Scripture's relevance in the Spirit, one participant may discern an understanding or application in one direction with other seeing a different implication. My claim here is that Bible studies should be patient of this because, not despite, the confidence in Scripture's authority. That is, as readers reflect on PP for their spiritual lives in the guiding framings of our authors, they are not looking for the final word on Scriptural reference and application. Rather they desire to allow possible prophetic construals to be tested out in their lives. These studies might become bibliolatrous if they were to deploy the Bible's accepted authority to support some position that does not have theological-narrative support. Or the same

outcome might arise accidentally if proof-texts mystify rather than clarifying claims made. They might become bibliolatrous if they deliberately read PP against lines of clear interpretation to support a position that is asserted to be biblical without proof or warrant, just to be accepted from the author by association with the spiritual classic.

What if studies strike what a critic might suppose to be a 'conservative' note? We have seen that different authors are anxious about different things to differing extents. Ford's and Johnson's are the most clearly concerned that their readers' social contexts are already ones of persecution. Does the rhetoric of asking questions and providing answer prompts that support that position prove bibliolatry? If persecution is a clear scriptural theme for Christ-followers, it cannot be unbiblical to harken to it. Careful note should be taken that even if the authors assume that the readers will have in their minds the same list of persecutory incidents in their homeland, these are not specified. Again, this opens up the space for imaginative biblical Christian interpretation rather than closing it down bibliolatrously.

Theologically, Bible studies that see, through a text like PP, a range of discipleship issues, are of course composed from the author's reading of their own cultural context, acknowledging the Bible's, as then discerned through Bunyan's. This is merely a complexifying of the 'double listening' to Scripture and to contemporary culture that evangelical stalwart John Stott commends (1992). If PP is the textual site for evangelical biblical reflection on what it means to follow Christ in the world towards to world to come, there is no sense in this collection of studies or devotionals that a close-minded univocity is expected in bible interpretation and application. It is indeed in the open-ended quality of study resources, with invitations to ponder, pray and converse, that openness of mind in interpreting and applying Scripture is modelled, even where

there are answers at the back of the book. To this extent, however the publishers or authors line up on inerrancy, these evangelical resources fail to exhibit bibliolatry by design. It may be that less guarded choice of Scriptures in Gilkerson's case veer this readers in that direction. More to the point, it could be that the bibliolatry charge is just as likely motivated by interpretative difference or ideological disposition, in which case, it might be supposed that the position of being Christian against the world in holding to 'Bible truth' against persecutors is an instance of bibliolatrous sectarianism. But this shows the charge is not really about bibliolatry but something else to which the term stands as a proxy.

Can Bible studies or devotionals on PP be appropriately faithful adaptations? Bunyan wanted his travelers to turn continuously to Scripture. Given that he wrote and published a book for that pastoral goal we can assume that the commercial involvement of today's publishers in Christian resource marketing implies no more or less a phenomena of damnable worldliness than for Bunyan. The extent to which all the authors point readers, through PP, to Scripture shows that, however they differ in their application to contemporary questions, these are consistent adaptations of that Bunyanesque intentionality. The memory of the work that Bunyan's PP intended to effect – pondering the work of salvation in oneself among others in conversation under the guidance of the Bible – endures. One classic text engenders a multitude of evangelical responses, spawning still more in bible study participants and devotional readers. This plurality of response is not a failure of Christian discernment. Rather such is the way of Bible study participation until the advent of the Celestial city itself. Fidelity until that final day is not univocal but patient of the process of discernment as to which scriptures in present circumstances authorize faithful Christian discipleship.

Immediate implications from this concluding theological analysis redound to the task of creating bible study resources focused on non-biblical literary materials. These may be informally useful to ministries seeking to set up book clubs to enable the reading of popular contemporary fiction in an inclusive yet evangelistic context. More formal Bible study groups are also in view. The lessons apply, then, more broadly than in relation only to spiritual classics. Indeed, it could be that Bunyan is already so biblically explicit that the task is potentially both easier and harder – easier because he gives his own indications of bible texts to study, harder because his having done so may be seen to constrain valid, biblically imaginative responses to his text in the different circumstances of contemporary Christians. Nevertheless, we have seen that fidelity to Scripture will involve a commitment to a Scriptural narrative arc that is theologically articulate, while eschatologically open and thus humble in avoiding drawing overly strong lines from interpretation to requirements for thought and action in discipleship for contemporary readers. In other words, the story arcs of both Bible and literary text may elicit a bounded plurality of imaginative responses as we have seen in the uses our sources have made of PP. At the same time, these resources, in their plurality and explicit invitation of reader response through the formal use of questions and prompts for prayer, are open to the Spirit's work of conviction and transformation in the local setting of the study user(s). To this end, they deliberately and wisely eschew overinterpretation and imposition of closed meaning. Given the Bible's, and Bunyan's, and contemporary resource authors' conviction that the Christian life involves opposition and suffering, so long as the resources do not overprescribe their own particular detailed account of what this opposition must be, prompts to consider, recognize and pray through a spiritual battle against opposition does not become bibliolatry – that is, the co-option of the task of scriptural imagination to any one social, ethical, political or economic judgment or policy or hobbyhorse. In examining the practice and the theology of biblically imaginative study of non-biblical texts, in

this case, PP, we find that open questions, clear Scriptural orientation, plausible literary and spiritual sensibility, and evident textual invitation of the Spirit's transformative work through prayer, reflection and churchly discussion are hallmarks of ministry resources that avoid bibliolatry. Where these elements are less fully fleshed out, the invitation to multiple scriptures in the bible study format is in danger of under resourcing this responsible double hearing of Scripture and literary text, allowing interpretive slippage from accountable Scripture shaped reading of, in this case, PP. The PP interpreter writing the guide ends up taking Scripture hostage and constraining the resource user's comprehension of the Bible for the sake of fitting references to the story. Where the Bible becomes, even accidentally, the text that must be fitted to the contours of another text's interpretation, interpreters are invited into a more chaotic individualism of response led by intellect or guess-work rather than open to the Spirit. Precisely where the controlling narrative is not the sequential exposition of Scripture but some other, even a spiritual classic like PP, the danger of bibliolatry lurks.

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