



he Bible Student is asking some age-old questions.

“Infectious Enthusiasm” and “Scary Smart.” Those are the two phrases that keep cycling through my mind as I sit talking with Randy Coy about his new venture, The Bible Student, which opens at Habersham on Saturday, Oct 27th, in the middle of Harvest Festival. That’s right: There in the hustling, bustling Habersham Marketplace – along with the food and the music and the hayrides and the costume contest – a place called The Bible Student will make its debut. Seems unusual, doesn’t it? Well, from what I can glean, there’s nothing “usual” about Randy or the new business he’s opening with his daughter Kristin. In fact, I’m not even sure “business” is the right word. The one thing I

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sure of? I’m intrigued.

I'm downtown with Randy at City Java – his “other office” – hoping to learn more about The Bible Student.

Margaret Evans: So, what *is* this place, Randy? Can you explain?

Randy Coy: I'd love to! In fact, I really appreciate the opportunity to do just that. Any time you talk about the Bible or religion, you have to overcome people's preconceived notions. First, and foremost, we're a shop that sells Bibles and study tools to help you read Bibles.

ME: So, you don't sell Christian literature? Christian gifts? That sort of thing?

RC: Nope. We're all about Bibles here. No ceramic angels, no crosses... nothing like that. We do have coffee, though! (Laughs.) And lots of space for reading and study. Buying a Bible can be a lot easier than actually reading it, so we plan to offer a variety of classes to help beginning and advanced readers learn the geography, historical context and structure of the Bible.

ME: I've never actually entered an establishment like yours. I was there a few nights ago, and it's really cozy and inviting . . . not "Christian-y" at all. No offense! You know what I mean . . .

RC: (Laughs). Absolutely. I'm glad it feels that way to you.

ME: So, have *you* ever entered an establishment like yours? Do others exist?

RC: I haven't! But my daughter Kristin got the idea from a friend who'd been in South Africa and seen a shop like ours. Lots of Bibles and reading space. When we moved to Beaufort from Ohio about eight years ago, Kristin was trying to buy a new Bible and found there wasn't much of a selection out there. Here we were in the Bible Belt, and there were very few Bibles to be found! The seed for The Bible Student was planted then.

ME: Do you have a target customer in mind?

RC: No. I really don't. My "target customer" is anyone who would like to try reading the Bible for

any reason at all. I think it's the most valuable book in the world. That's my personal conviction. But I think it needs to be read by everybody, so they can make their own decision about it. To either live by it . . . or not. To understand it . . . or not. To pursue it . . . or not.

ME: So this is more about teaching and learning than preaching and proselytizing?

RC: Oh, definitely. I want people to come into this shop for whatever reason – from whatever background – knowing that nobody's going to try to pressure them into a group or a certain belief system. Our goal is to help educate and enable people to draw their own conclusions on some of life's biggest questions."

ME: As you know, lots of people have been burned by the church. Or by *people* in the church, rather. What would you say to someone who might be Bible-curious but church-wary? Would The Bible Student be a safe place for that person?

RC: Absolutely. In fact, "safe" is just the right word. I want it to be so safe for that individual that I would probably even protect them from someone else – however well meaning – who might try to engage them in the shop.

ME: According to your website, you'll be teaching many of the classes yourself. What's your background?

RC: The first thing you need to know about me is that I'm a student, too. I have not been to seminary or divinity school. I have no official "religious training" of any sort. I'm just a lifelong student of the Bible who's still learning. Also, for the past 25 years, I've been working for a company that supplies communication resources to churches – about 150,000 different churches and synagogues across America, to be specific. We sell everything from children's to pastoral resources. Sunday school curriculum, Bible study resources, power points, newsletters, etc. So, I've been exposed to the teaching literature of every denomination under the sun – both Christian and Jewish. I read everything I sell. It's been a real education.

ME: You're still working for this company, I understand?

RC: That's right. Communication Resources (that's the name of our company) has been very good to me. It's a wonderful company with wonderful products and services, and it's enabled me to save enough resources to make a three-year minimum commitment to The Bible Student. So, in a way, every church in America has invested in this venture!

ME: You and Kristin *both* have day jobs. The Bible Student is a non-profit and you're running it

as volunteers. That's almost unbelievable. What's your motivation?

RC: Well, as I said, I think the Bible is the most valuable book in the world. I want to share what I've learned with as many people as I can, and I want to keep learning, myself. Mainly, I'm doing this for my daughter – she's very serious about her studies – and for the rest of my family. We decided that whether or not anybody ever comes through our doors, we're going to be here for at least three years. And we're going to *really* study the Bible!

ME: You sound like you haven't lost interest after all this time.

RC: (Laughs.) Not at all. The deeper you get into the Bible, the more fascinating it becomes. I was taught to read using this book. Before I started school, I learned to read the Bible. My parents were very pro-education, and they figured you could start anywhere. You could start with Homer and the Illiad or you could start with the Bible. You could also start with See Spot Run, but, as my mom said, "You can spell GOD just as easily as DOG." So, we started with the Bible. From the beginning, we were taught that the Bible is the place you start everything. We did the same with our children.

ME: Have you limited your religious studies to the Bible, or have you read other sacred texts, as well?

RC: Oh, I've definitely read other sacred texts! The Quran, the Book of Mormon . . . You have to! You have to look at other faith traditions if you want to understand your own. To understand where the faiths depart from each other . . . and where they intersect. Before I went to work for Communication Resources, I was an engineer at the Timken Company. I've always been extremely interested in math and science. So, I take a somewhat analytical approach to the Bible.

ME: Christians are often accused of being "afraid of science." Not you?

RC: (Laughs) Absolutely not. Religion and science must coexist! Look, science has got belief systems too. Sooner or later, you're going have to believe something . . . or not. But I believe the scientific method – of testing variables, etc. – is great. You *should* form a hypothesis when you're reading the Bible. But then you have to keep reading to *test* your hypothesis. And then, of course, you adjust that hypothesis when you find evidence that it's wrong. That's a lifelong journey, and I'm definitely still on it! I would be embarrassed if anybody thought I had opened The Bible Student because I think I've *arrived*.

ME: The most recent Pew Report showed that Americans are steadily moving away from church affiliation. And Biblical literacy, even among Christians, is pretty low. It seems to me The Bible Student may be filling a vacuum.

RC: I hope so. I don't think churches have done a particularly good job of teaching. When I look at some of the curriculum out there, it's just moralism. They're teaching moral conduct. Well, atheists have moral conduct! Morality is somewhat distinct from Christianity. While churches should certainly uphold and promote morality, they don't really need to be teaching it. If you're teaching the Bible, morality will come. If you follow God's word, you're moral. And, of course, you can be moral *without* following God's word, too.

ME: Speaking of morality... do you plan to take on any of the hot button political issues currently challenging the church?

RC: I really don't. The church has moved too deeply into politics, don't you think? You look at Jesus, and he just didn't concern himself with politics. He was so far from that. He was preaching the Kingdom of God, after all, and he said that it went beyond political and national boundaries. You have to believe that God is bigger than that. Bigger, even, than *the United States*.
(Laughs)

ME: Speaking of big . . . you're planning to stock over 250 different Bible translations. Why so many?

RC: Because there are so many out there! And we believe the only way to make an intelligent choice – to find the one that's right for you – is to have lots of options.

ME: So, do different people really need different Bibles?

RC: Well, if you speak Spanish, you're going to need a Spanish translation, obviously. But, even beyond that, yes. Some people may do very well with the King James translation. And it's a wonderful translation. But it's written in the English of the 1600s, so you might want something a little easier to read. And some people might prefer a really contemporary translation. I'm okay with that.

ME: What's your favorite version of the Bible?

RC: That's kind of like asking me which one of my four children is my favorite. I like a lot of the translations. But right now, I'm very partial to the ESV. (English Standard Version.) It's very faithful, built on the King James tradition. It's written in the English of 2010, but with the same translation principles as the King James.

Actually, I think reading a variety of translations is a great thing to do. It's the best way to see that they don't all say the same thing, so you have to be careful! I would never want to trust a

single translator, or a single translation team.

ME: You just want people to trust you as a Bible teacher!

RC: (Laughs) As I said, I don't have all the answers. Our mission is to teach people how to seek out answers for themselves. When somebody asks me a question and I don't know the answer, I show them approaches to finding it. I could point them to verses if they wanted, but I'd rather show them how to use a concordance! We want to show people how very carefully the Bible is written. If I started "answering" people's questions right off the bat, I would blow their trust.

ME: And you would make it less fascinating . . .

RC: That's right! Why do you think Jesus taught in parables instead of just laying it out there? He wanted people to think! He wanted them to be intrigued. He always spoke in a way that got people engaged and fascinated.

ME: So, what you're saying is that you're like Jesus? Is that it, Randy?

RC: Yes, write that down! (Laughs.) Actually, I'm happy to have you say that I would *love* to be as good a teacher as Jesus was. He was a marvelous teacher.

ME: Don't worry. I promise not to make you sound like a kooky religious nut. I'm too excited about this project.

RC: Thanks. But word'll get around anyway. "Hey, have you heard about The Bible Student? They're sacrificing chickens over there on Wednesdays . . ." (Laughs) But, seriously, I've met lots of people who are excited about it, too. At the shop. Around town. Right here in City Java. People seem really interested. They seem intrigued.

ME: Well, I have a feeling you're not what people expect.

RC: I don't know about that. I'm just a guy who's trying to do his best.

The Bible Student opens during Harvest Festival on Saturday, October 27th at 10-A 1 Market St. in Habersham Marketplace.

Complimentary 20-minute classes on a variety of Biblical topics and themes will be offered throughout opening day, and the store will be open for general shopping, browsing and inquiries. For more information, visit

www.TheBibleStudent.com

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