

Bible disposal: Burning the book

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [March 22, 2003](#) issue

Subscriber Sue R. Wilcox of Denver asked this columnist: “What do you do respectfully with old worn-out Bibles?” I respect her respect for the Bible and sympathize with her problem. So many new editions of the Bible are published, advertised, sold, sometimes opened and even read each year that some day the piles of old worn-out Bibles will be as high as the forests from whose trees they derived.

Rules about disposing of the Qur’an and the Torah scrolls are distinct and fierce. But since we Christians have done less stipulating, it is time to brainstorm. (I will welcome and perhaps publish suggestions from readers.) Search the web for “disposal” and you will find clear suggestions for disposing of that really sacred object, the U.S. flag—e.g., have the American Legion burn it in a formal ceremony—but there is little on Bible disposal.

A friend in “waste management” once told me that we do high-tech versions today of what the ancients did with waste: we burn what we can, bury what we can’t, or we toss it all into the river. I have not figured out the river-toss for Bibles, so my advice is, burn them.

People often did. Several years ago I wrote a script on the history of Bible translation for the American Bible Society. I’ve seen a rough cut of the film, but don’t think it’s been released. Someone wondered how such a subject could be telegenic. I said, “Visualize flames.” Historically, enemies burned either the translators or the translations. But even slightly liberal Christians are nervous about turning to book burning. So? Have someone else do it.

That’s easy if the worn-out Bible is a Revised Standard Version, dating from any time after September 30, 1952. (That’s old by now!) Look up newspapers of the era and you will find regular accounts of fundamentalists burning copies of what they called “Stalin’s Bible.” It was Stalin’s because the “commie” National Council of Churches held the copyright and the experts translated the Hebrew word for maiden, *almah*, as “maiden,” instead of the non-Stalinist preference, “virgin.” Fifty plus years later,

phone your friendly neighborhood ultrafundamentalist and let him do the disposing.

If a Bible antedates 1900, someone in your acquaintance will think it must be valuable and may consult you about marketing it. Take her up on it and then mail it to any used bookseller, who will promptly drop it into the black hole where millions of similar monetarily worthless scriptures have disappeared. It will be off your conscience.

Wilcox mentioned Bibles in which old-timers registered their family trees. My suggestion: ship such antiques to the genealogical experts of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They will conscientiously record the names of ancestors, as they have done for literally—yes, literally—billions of people from whom we have descended and who now merit baptism for the dead (1 Cor. 15:29). They store microfilm versions of these lists of names under a mountain—again, a literal mountain. There must be room for old Bibles there too.

Bury them? This can be done with a respectful ceremony. No doubt there's an old liturgy appropriate for the occasion. Be sure to do this under rich, slightly damp forest soil so the books can quickly decompose and provide nutrients for new trees whose wood can be used for new Bibles.

I have a particular problem: in 1987 someone sent me a bicentennial version of the Bible, with a tiny cross of Christ and a large and bold U.S. flag on the cover. Maybe I could call the American Legion and pawn it off on them as a flag with a strange base.